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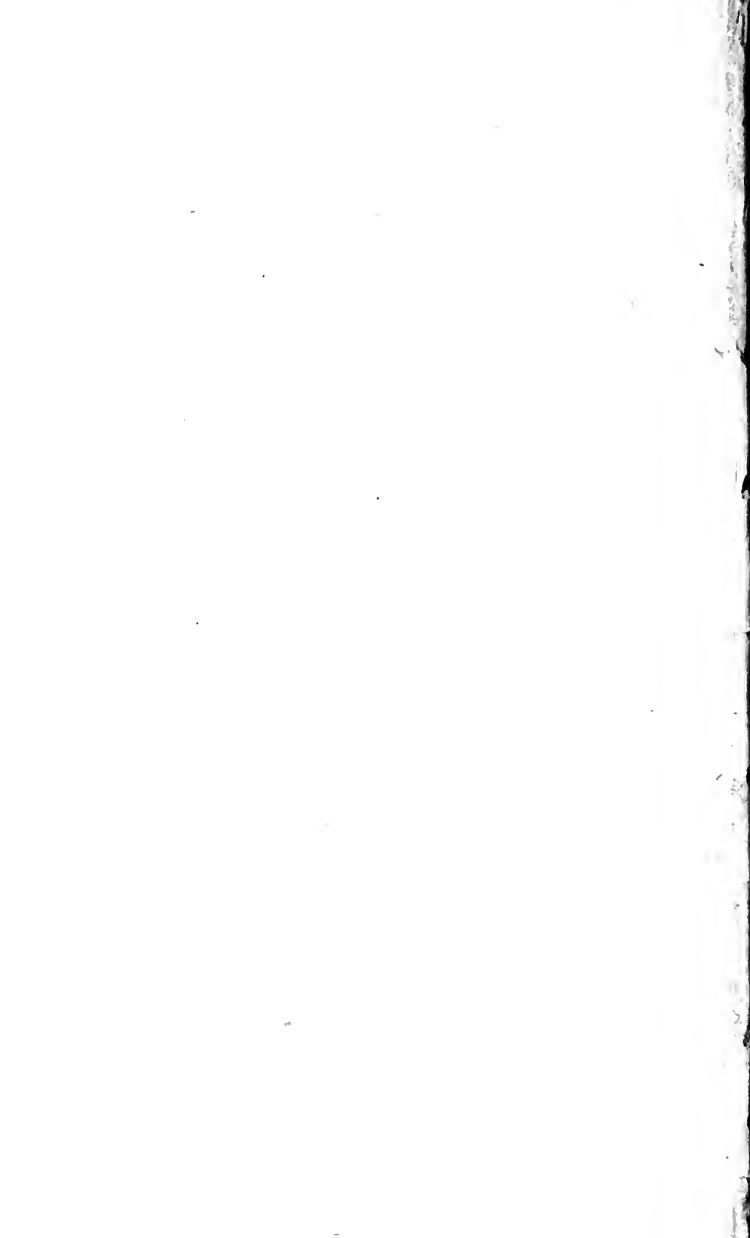
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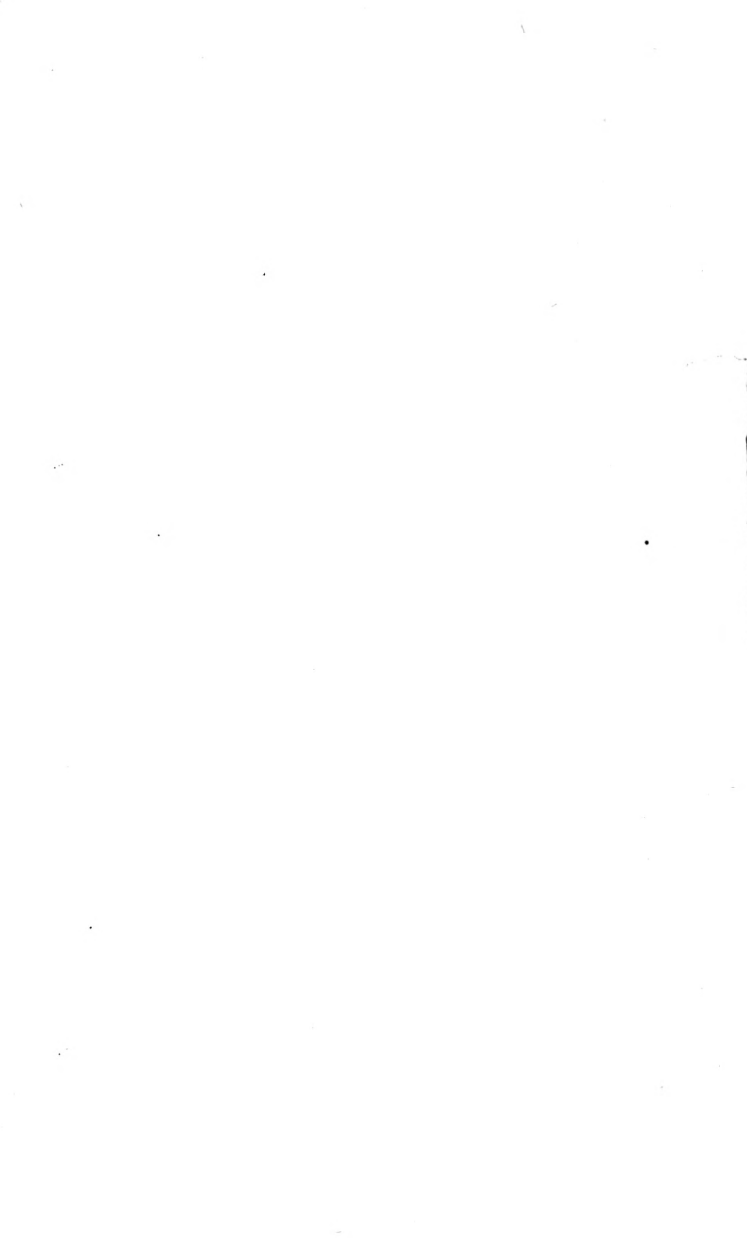
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N O N A M E .



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BY

WILKIE COLLINS,

AUTHOR OF "THE WOMAN IN WHITE," "THE DEAD SECRET,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON :

SAMPSON LOW, SON, & CO., 47 LUDGATE HILL.

1862.

*[The Right of Translation is Reserved; and the Privilege of Dramatic Adaptation
has been Secured by the Author.]*

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LONDON: PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, STAMFORD STREET
AND CHARING CROSS.

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247:~

BETWEEN THE SCENES.

CHRONICLE OF EVENTS: PRESERVED IN CAPTAIN
WRAGGE'S DESPATCH BOX.



BETWEEN THE SCENES.



CAPTAIN WRAGGE'S DESPATCH BOX.

I.

CHRONICLE FOR OCTOBER, 1846.

I HAVE retired into the bosom of my family. We are residing in the secluded village of Ruswarp, on the banks of the Esk, about two miles inland from Whitby. Our lodgings are comfortable, and we possess the additional blessing of a tidy landlady. Mrs. Wragge and Miss Vanstone preceded me here, in accordance with the plan I laid down for effecting our retreat from York. On the next day I followed them alone, with the luggage. On leaving the terminus, I had the satisfaction of seeing the lawyer's clerk in close confabulation with the detective officer whose advent I had prophesied. I left him in peaceable possession of the city of York, and the whole surrounding neighbourhood. He has returned the compliment, and has left us in peaceable possession of the valley of the Esk, thirty miles away from him.

Remarkable results have followed my first efforts at the cultivation of Miss Vanstone's dramatic abilities.

I have discovered that she possesses extraordinary talent as a mimic. She has the flexible face, the manageable voice, and the dramatic knack which fit a woman for character-parts and disguises on the stage. All she now wants is teaching and practice to make her sure of her own resources. The experience of her, thus gained, has revived an idea in my mind, which originally occurred to me at one of the "At Homes" of the late inimitable Charles Mathews, comedian. I was in the Wine Trade at the time, I remember. We imitated the Vintage-processes of Nature, in a back-kitchen at Brompton; and produced a dinner-sherry, pale and curious, tonic in character, round in the mouth, a favourite with the Court of Spain, at nineteen and sixpence a dozen, bottles included—*Vide* Prospectus of the period. The profits of myself and partners were small; we were in advance of the tastes of the age, and in debt to the bottle merchant. Being at my wits' end for want of money, and seeing what audiences Mathews drew, the idea occurred to me of starting an imitation of the great Imitator himself, in the shape of an "At Home," given by a woman. The one trifling obstacle in the way was the difficulty of finding the woman. From that time to this, I have hitherto failed to overcome it. I have conquered it at last: I have found the woman now. Miss Vanstone possesses youth and beauty as well as talent. Train her in the art of dramatic disguise; pro-

vide her with appropriate dresses for different characters; develop her accomplishments in singing and playing; give her plenty of smart talk addressed to the audience; advertise her as *A Young Lady at Home*; astonish the public by a dramatic entertainment which depends from first to last on that young lady's own sole exertions; commit the entire management of the thing to my care—and what follows as a necessary consequence? Fame for my fair relative, and a fortune for myself.

I put these considerations, as frankly as usual, to Miss Vanstone; offering to write the *Entertainment*, to manage all the business, and to share the profits. I did not forget to strengthen my case by informing her of the jealousies she would encounter, and the obstacles she would meet, if she went on the stage. And I wound up by a neat reference to the private inquiries which she is interested in making, and to the personal independence which she is desirous of securing before she acts on her information. “If you go on the stage,” I said, “your services will be bought by a manager, and he may insist on his claims just at the time when you want to get free from him. If, on the contrary, you adopt my views, you will be your own mistress and your own manager, and you can settle your course just as you like.” This last consideration appeared to strike her. She took a day to consider it; and when the day was over, gave her consent.

I had the whole transaction down in black and white immediately. Our arrangement is eminently satis-

factory, except in one particular. She shows a morbid distrust of writing her name at the bottom of any document which I present to her; and roundly declares she will sign nothing. As long as it is her interest to provide herself with pecuniary resources for the future, she verbally engages to go on. When it ceases to be her interest, she plainly threatens to leave off at a week's notice. A difficult girl to deal with: she has found out her own value to me already. One comfort is, I have the cooking of the accounts; and my fair relative shall not fill her pockets too suddenly, if I can help it.

My exertions in training Miss Vanstone for the coming experiment, have been varied by the writing of two anonymous letters, in that young lady's interests. Finding her too fidgety about arranging matters with her friends to pay proper attention to my instructions, I wrote anonymously to the lawyer who is conducting the inquiry after her; recommending him in a friendly way to give it up. The letter was enclosed to a friend of mine in London, with instructions to post it at Charing Cross. A week later, I sent a second letter, through the same channel, requesting the lawyer to inform me, in writing, whether he and his clients had or had not decided on taking my advice. I directed him, with jocosé reference to the collision of interests between us, to address his letter:—"Tit for Tat, Post Office, West Strand."

In a few days the answer arrived—privately forwarded, of course, to Post Office, Whitby, by arrangement with my friend in London.

The lawyer's reply was short and surly: "Sir—If my advice had been followed, you and your anonymous letter would both be treated with the contempt which they deserve. But the wishes of Miss Magdalen Vanstone's eldest sister have claims on my consideration which I cannot dispute; and at her entreaty I inform you that all further proceedings on my part are withdrawn—on the express understanding that this concession is to open facilities for written communication at least, between the two sisters. A letter from the elder Miss Vanstone is enclosed in this. If I don't hear, in a week's time, that it has been received, I shall place the matter once more in the hands of the police. — WILLIAM PENDRIL." A sour man, this William Pendril. I can only say of him, what an eminent nobleman once said of his sulky servant—"I wouldn't have such a temper as that fellow has got, for any earthly consideration that could be offered me!"

As a matter of course, I looked into the letter which the lawyer enclosed, before delivering it. Miss Vanstone, the elder, described herself as distracted at not hearing from her sister; as suited with a governess's situation in a private family; as going into the situation in a week's time; and as longing for a letter to comfort her, before she faced the trial of undertaking her new duties. After closing the envelope again, I accompanied the delivery of the letter to Miss Vanstone the younger, by a word of caution. "Are you more sure of your own courage now," I said, "than you were when I met you?" She was ready with her answer.

“Captain Wragge, when you met me on the Walls of York, I had not gone too far to go back. I have gone too far now.”

If she really feels this—and I think she does—her corresponding with her sister can do no harm. She wrote at great length the same day; cried profusely over her own epistolatory composition; and was remarkably ill-tempered and snappish towards me, when we met in the evening. She wants experience, poor girl—she sadly wants experience of the world. How consoling to know that I am just the man to give it her!

II.

CHRONICLE FOR NOVEMBER.

We are established at Derby. The Entertainment is written; and the rehearsals are in steady progress. All difficulties are provided for, but the one eternal difficulty of money. Miss Vanstone's resources stretch easily enough to the limits of our personal wants; including pianoforte hire for practice, and the purchase and making of the necessary dresses. But the expenses of starting the Entertainment are beyond the reach of any means we possess. A theatrical friend of mine here, whom I had hoped to interest in our undertaking, proves unhappily to be at a crisis in his career. The field of human sympathy, out of which I might have raised the needful pecuniary crop, is closed to me from want of time to cultivate it. I see no other re-

source left—if we are to be ready by Christmas—than to try one of the local music-sellers in this town, who is said to be a speculating man. A private rehearsal at these lodgings, and a bargain which will fill the pockets of a grasping stranger—such are the sacrifices which dire necessity imposes on me at starting. Well! there is only one consolation: I'll cheat the music-seller.

III.

CHRONICLE FOR DECEMBER. FIRST FORTNIGHT.

The music-seller extorts my unwilling respect. He is one of the very few human beings I have met with in the course of my life who is not to be cheated. He has taken a masterly advantage of our helplessness; and has imposed terms on us, for performances at Derby and Nottingham, with such a business-like disregard of all interests but his own, that—fond as I am of putting things down in black and white—I really cannot prevail upon myself to record the bargain. It is needless to say, I have yielded with my best grace; sharing with my fair relative the wretched pecuniary prospects offered to us. Our turn will come. In the mean time, I cordially regret not having known the local music-seller in early life.

Personally speaking, I have no cause to complain of Miss Vanstone. We have arranged that she shall regularly forward her address (at the post office) to her friends, as we move about from place to place. Besides communicating in this way with her sister, she

also reports herself to a certain Mr. Clare, residing in Somersetshire, who is to forward all letters exchanged between herself and his son. Careful inquiry has informed me that this latter individual is now in China. Having suspected, from the first, that there was a gentleman in the background, it is highly satisfactory to know that he recedes into the remote perspective of Asia. Long may he remain there !

The trifling responsibility of finding a name for our talented Magdalen to perform under, has been cast on my shoulders. She feels no interest whatever in this part of the subject. "Give me any name you like," she said ; "I have as much right to one as to another. Make it yourself." I have readily consented to gratify her wishes. The resources of my commercial library include a list of useful names to assume ; and we can choose one at five minutes' notice, when the admirable man of business who now oppresses us is ready to issue his advertisements. On this point my mind is easy enough : all my anxieties centre in the fair performer. I have not the least doubt she will do wonders if she is only left to herself on the first night. But if the day's post is mischievous enough to upset her by a letter from her sister, I tremble for the consequences.

IV.

CHRONICLE FOR DECEMBER. SECOND FORTNIGHT.

My gifted relative has made her first appearance in public, and has laid the foundation of our future fortunes.

On the first night, the attendance was larger than I had ventured to hope. The novelty of an evening's entertainment, conducted from beginning to end by the unaided exertions of a young lady (see advertisement) roused the public curiosity, and the seats were moderately well filled. As good luck would have it, no letter addressed to Miss Vanstone came that day. She was in full possession of herself, until she got the first dress on, and heard the bell ring for the music. At that critical moment she suddenly broke down. I found her alone in the waiting-room, sobbing, and talking like a child. "Oh, poor papa! poor papa! Oh, my God, if he saw me now!" My experience in such matters at once informed me that it was a case for sal-volatile, accompanied by sound advice. We strung her up, in no time, to concert pitch; set her eyes in a blaze; and made her out-blush her own rouge. The curtain rose when we had got her at a red heat. She dashed at it, exactly as she dashed at it in the back drawing-room at Rosemary Lane. Her personal appearance settled the question of her reception before she opened her lips. She rushed full gallop through her changes of character, her songs, and her dialogue; making mistakes by the dozen, and never stopping to set them right; carrying the people along with her in a perfect whirlwind, and never waiting for the applause. The whole thing was over twenty minutes sooner than the time we had calculated on. She carried it through to the end; and fainted on the waiting-room sofa, a minute after the curtain was

down. The music-seller having taken leave of his senses from sheer astonishment ; and I having no evening costume to appear in—we sent the doctor to make the necessary apology to the public, who were calling for her till the place rang again. I prompted our medical orator with a neat speech from behind the curtain ; and I never heard such applause, from such a comparatively small audience, before in my life. I felt the tribute—I felt it deeply. Fourteen years ago I scraped together the wretched means of existence, in this very town, by reading the newspaper (with explanatory comments) to the company at a public-house. And now, here I am at the top of the tree.

It is needless to say that my first proceeding was to bowl out the music-seller on the spot. He called the next morning, no doubt with a liberal proposal for extending the engagement beyond Derby and Nottingham. My niece was described as not well enough to see him ; and, when he asked for me, he was told I was not up. I happened to be, at that moment, engaged in putting the case pathetically to our gifted Magdalen. Her answer was in the highest degree satisfactory. She would permanently engage herself to nobody—least of all to a man who had taken sordid advantage of her position and mine. She would be her own mistress, and share the profits with me, while she wanted money, and while it suited her to go on. So far so good. But the reason she added next, for her flattering preference of myself, was less to my taste. “The music-seller is not the man whom I employ to

make my inquiries," she said. "You are the man." I don't like her steadily remembering those inquiries, in the first bewilderment of her success. It looks ill for the future ; it looks infernally ill for the future.

V.

CHRONICLE FOR JANUARY, 1847.

She has shown the cloven foot already. I begin to be a little afraid of her.

On the conclusion of the Nottingham engagement (the results of which more than equalled the results at Derby), I proposed taking the entertainment next—now we had got it into our own hands—to Newark. Miss Vanstone raised no objection, until we came to the question of time, when she amazed me by stipulating for a week's delay, before we appeared in public again.

"For what possible purpose?" I asked.

"For the purpose of making the inquiries which I mentioned to you at York," she answered.

I instantly enlarged on the danger of delay ; putting all the considerations before her in every imaginable form. She remained perfectly immoveable. I tried to shake her on the question of expenses. She answered by handing me over her share of the proceeds at Derby and Nottingham—and there were my expenses paid, at the rate of nearly two guineas a day. I wonder who first picked out a mule as the type of obstinacy?

How little knowledge that man must have had of women !

There was no help for it. I took down my instructions in black and white, as usual. My first exertions were to be directed to the discovery of Mr. Michael Vanstone's address : I was also expected to find out how long he was likely to live there, and whether he had sold Combe-Raven or not. My next inquiries were to inform me of his ordinary habits of life ; of what he did with his money ; of who his intimate friends were ; and of the sort of terms on which his son, Mr. Noel Vanstone, was now living with him. Lastly, the investigations were to end in discovering whether there was any female relative, or any woman exercising domestic authority in the house, who was known to have an influence over either father or son.

If my long practice in cultivating the field of human sympathy had not accustomed me to private investigations into the affairs of other people, I might have found some of these queries rather difficult to deal with in the course of a week. As it was, I gave myself all the benefit of my own experience ; and brought the answers back to Nottingham in a day less than the given time. Here they are, in regular order, for convenience of future reference :—

(1.) Mr. Michael Vanstone is now residing at German Place, Brighton, and likely to remain there ; as he finds the air suit him. He reached London from Switzerland in September last ; and sold the Combe-Raven property immediately on his arrival.

(2.) His ordinary habits of life are secret and retired; he seldom visits, or receives company. Part of his money is supposed to be in the funds, and part laid out in railway investments, which have survived the panic of eighteen hundred and forty-six, and are rapidly rising in value. He is said to be a bold speculator. Since his arrival in England he has invested with great judgment in house property. He has some houses in remote parts of London; and some houses in certain watering-places on the east coast, which are shown to be advancing in public repute. In all these cases he is reported to have made remarkably good bargains.

(3.) It is not easy to discover who his intimate friends are. Two names only have been ascertained. The first is Admiral Bartram; supposed to have been under friendly obligations, in past years, to Mr. Michael Vanstone. The second is Mr. George Bartram, nephew of the Admiral, and now staying on a short visit in the house at German Place. Mr. George Bartram is the son of the late Mr. Andrew Vanstone's sister, also deceased. He is therefore a cousin of Mr. Noel Vanstone's. This last—viz., Mr. Noel Vanstone—is in delicate health, and is living on excellent terms with his father, in German Place.

(4.) There is no female relative in Mr. Michael Vanstone's family circle. But there is a housekeeper who has lived in his service ever since his wife's death, and who has acquired a strong influence over both father and son. She is a native of Switzerland, elderly, and a widow. Her name is Mrs. Lecount.

On placing these particulars in Miss Vanstone's hands, she made no remark, except to thank me. I endeavoured to invite her confidence. No results; nothing but a renewal of civility, and a sudden shifting to the subject of the Entertainment. Very good. If she won't give me the information I want, the conclusion is obvious—I must help myself.

Business considerations claim the remainder of this page. Let me return to business.

Financial Statement.	Third Week in January.
Place Visited. Newark.	Performances. Two.
Net Receipts. In black and white. £25	Net Receipts, Actually Realized. £32 10s.
Apparent Division of Profits.	Actual Division of Profits.
Miss V. £12 10	Miss V.. . . . £12 10
Self £12 10	Self £20 0
Private Surplus on the Week, Or say, Self-presented Testimonial. £7 10s.	
Audited, H. WRAGGE.	Passed correct, H. WRAGGE.

The next stronghold of British sympathy which we take by storm is Sheffield. We open the first week in February.

VI.

CHRONICLE FOR FEBRUARY.

Practice has now given my fair relative the confidence which I predicted would come with time. Her knack of disguising her own identity, in the impersonation of different characters, so completely staggers her audiences, that the same people come twice over, to find out how she does it. It is the amiable defect of the English public never to know when they have had enough of a good thing. They actually try to encore one of her characters—an old north-country lady; modelled on that honoured preceptress in the late Mr. Vanstone's family, to whom I presented myself at Combe-Raven. This particular performance fairly amazes the people. I don't wonder at it. Such an extraordinary assumption of age by a girl of nineteen, has never been seen in public before, in the whole course of my theatrical experience.

I find myself writing in a lower tone than usual; I miss my own dash of humour. The fact is, I am depressed about the future. In the very height of our prosperity, my perverse pupil sticks to her trumpery family quarrel. I feel myself at the mercy of the first whim in the Vanstone direction which may come into her head—I, the architect of her fortunes. 'Too bad; upon my soul, too bad.

She has acted already on the inquiries which she forced me to make for her. She has written two letters to Mr. Michael Vanstone.

To the first letter no answer came. To the second a reply was received. Her infernal cleverness put an obstacle I had not expected in the way of my intercepting it. Later in the day, after she had herself opened and read the answer, I laid another trap for her. It just succeeded, and no more. I had half a minute to look into the envelope in her absence. It contained nothing but her own letter returned. She is not the girl to put up quietly with such an insult as this. Mischief will come of it—Mischief to Michael Vanstone—which is of no earthly consequence: mischief to Me—which is a truly serious matter.

VII.

CHRONICLE FOR MARCH.

After performing at Sheffield and Manchester, we have moved to Liverpool, Preston, and Lancaster. Another change in this weathercock of a girl. She has written no more letters to Michael Vanstone; and she has become as anxious to make money as I am myself. We are realizing large profits, and we are worked to death. I don't like this change in her: she has a purpose to answer, or she would not show such extraordinary eagerness to fill her purse. Nothing I can do—no cooking of accounts; no self-presented testimonials—can keep that purse empty. The success of the Entertainment, and her own sharpness in looking after her interests, literally force me into a course of

comparative honesty. She puts into her pocket more than a third of the profits, in defiance of my most arduous exertions to prevent her. And this at my age! this after my long and successful career as a moral agriculturist! Marks of admiration are very little things; but they express my feelings, and I put them in freely.

VIII.

CHRONICLE FOR APRIL AND MAY.

We have visited seven more large towns, and are now at Birmingham. Consulting my books, I find that Miss Vanstone has realized by the Entertainment, up to this time, the enormous sum of nearly four hundred pounds. It is quite possible that my own profits may reach one or two miserable hundreds more. But I am the architect of her fortunes—the publisher, so to speak, of her book—and, if anything, I am underpaid.

I made the above discovery on the twenty-ninth of the month—anniversary of the Restoration of my royal predecessor in the field of human sympathy, Charles the Second. I had barely finished locking up my despatch box—when the ungrateful girl, whose reputation I have made, came into the room; and told me in so many words, that the business connection between us was for the present at an end.

I attempt no description of my own sensations: I merely record facts. She informed me, with an ap-

pearance of perfect composure, that she needed rest, and that she had "new objects in view." She might possibly want me to assist those objects; and she might possibly return to the Entertainment. In either case it would be enough if we exchanged addresses, at which we could write to each other, in case of need. Having no desire to leave me too abruptly, she would remain the next day (which was Sunday); and would take her departure on Monday morning. Such was her explanation, in so many words.

Remonstrance, as I knew by experience, would be thrown away. Authority I had none to exert. My one sensible course to take in this emergency, was to find out which way my own interests pointed—and to go that way without a moment's unnecessary hesitation.

A very little reflection has since convinced me that she has a deep-laid scheme against Michael Vanstone in view. She is young, handsome, clever, and unscrupulous; she has made money to live on, and has time at her disposal to find out the weak side of an old man; and she is going to attack Mr. Michael Vanstone unawares with the legitimate weapons of her sex. Is she likely to want *me* for such a purpose as this? Doubtful. Is she merely anxious to get rid of me on easy terms? Probable. Am I the sort of man to be treated in this way by my own pupil? Decidedly not: I am the man to see my way through a neat succession of alternatives; and here they are:—

First alternative:—To announce my compliance with her proposal; to exchange addresses with her; and

then to keep my eye privately on all her future movements. Second alternative :—To express fond anxiety in a paternal capacity ; and to threaten giving the alarm to her sister and the lawyer, if she persists in her design. Third alternative :—To turn the information I already possess to the best account, by making it a marketable commodity between Mr. Michael Vanstone and myself. At present, I incline towards the last of these three courses. But my decision is far too important to be hurried. To-day is only the twenty-ninth. I will suspend my Chronicle of Events until Monday.

May 31st.—My alternatives and her plans are both overthrown together.

The newspaper came in, as usual, after breakfast. I looked it over, and discovered this memorable entry, among the obituary announcements of the day :—

“On the 29th inst., at Brighton, Michael Vanstone, Esq., formerly of Zurich, aged 77.”

Miss Vanstone was present in the room, when I read those two startling lines. Her bonnet was on ; her boxes were packed ; she was waiting impatiently until it was time to go to the train. I handed the paper to her, without a word on my side. Without a word on hers, she looked where I pointed, and read the news of Michael Vanstone’s death.

The paper dropped out of her hand ; and she suddenly pulled down her veil. I caught one glance at her face before she hid it from me. The effect on my

mind was startling in the extreme. To put it with my customary dash of humour—her face informed me that the most sensible action which Michael Vanstone, Esq., formerly of Zurich, had ever achieved in his life, was the action he performed at Brighton, on the 29th instant.

Finding the dead silence in the room singularly unpleasant under existing circumstances, I thought I would make a remark. My regard for my own interests supplied me with a subject. I mentioned the Entertainment.

“After what has happened,” I said, “I presume we go on with our performances as usual?”

“No,” she answered, behind the veil. “We go on with my inquiries.”

“Inquiries after a dead man.”

“Inquiries after the dead man’s son?”

“Mr. Noel Vanstone?”

“Yes; Mr. Noel Vanstone.”

Not having a veil to let down over my own face, I stooped and picked up the newspaper. Her devilish determination quite upset me for the moment. I actually had to steady myself, before I could speak to her again.

“Are the new inquiries as harmless as the old ones?” I asked.

“Quite as harmless.”

“What am I expected to find out?”

“I wish to know whether Mr. Noel Vanstone remains at Brighton after the funeral.”

“And if not?”

“If not, I shall want to know his new address, wherever it may be.”

“Yes. And what next?”

“I wish you to find out next, if all the father’s money goes to the son.”

I began to see her drift. The word money relieved me; I felt quite on my own ground again.

“Anything more?” I asked.

“Only one thing more,” she answered. “Make sure, if you please, whether Mrs. Lecount, the housekeeper, remains or not in Mr. Noel Vanstone’s service.”

Her voice altered a little, as she mentioned Mrs. Lecount’s name: she is evidently sharp enough to distrust the housekeeper already.

“My expenses are to be paid as usual?” I said.

“As usual.”

“When am I expected to leave for Brighton?”

“As soon as you can.”

She rose, and left the room. After a momentary doubt, I decided on executing the new commission. The more private inquiries I conduct for my fair relative, the harder she will find it to get rid of hers truly, Horatio Wragge.

There is nothing to prevent my starting for Brighton to-morrow. So to-morrow, I go. If Mr. Noel Vanstone succeeds to his father’s property, he is the only human being possessed of pecuniary blessings, who fails to inspire me with a feeling of unmitigated envy.

IX.

CHRONICLE FOR JUNE.

9th.—I returned yesterday with my information. Here it is, 'privately noted down for convenience of future reference :

Mr. Noel Vanstone has left Brighton; and has removed, for the purpose of transacting business in London, to one of his late father's empty houses in Vauxhall Walk, Lambeth. This singularly mean selection of a place of residence, on the part of a gentleman of fortune, looks as if Mr. N. V. and his money were not easily parted.

Mr. Noel Vanstone has stepped into his father's shoes under the following circumstances. Mr. Michael Vanstone appears to have died, curiously enough, as Mr. Andrew Vanstone died—intestate. With this difference, however, in the two cases, that the younger brother left an informal will, and the elder brother left no will at all. The hardest men have their weaknesses; and Mr. Michael Vanstone's weakness seems to have been an insurmountable horror of contemplating the event of his own death. His son, his housekeeper, and his lawyer, had all three tried over and over again, to get him to make a will; and had never shaken his obstinate resolution to put off performing the only business-duty he was ever known to neglect. Two doctors attended him in his last illness; warned him that he was too old a man to hope to get over it; and warned him in vain. He announced his own positive deter-

mination not to die. His last words in this world (as I succeeded in discovering from the nurse, who assisted Mrs. Lecount) were, "I'm getting better every minute; send for the fly directly and take me out for a drive." The same night, Death proved to be the more obstinate of the two; and left his son (and only child) to take the property in due course of law. Nobody doubts that the result would have been the same if a will had been made. The father and son had every confidence in each other; and were known to have always lived together on the most friendly terms.

Mrs. Lecount remains with Mr. Noel Vanstone, in the same housekeeping capacity which she filled with his father; and has accompanied him to the new residence in Vauxhall Walk. She is acknowledged on all hands to have been a sufferer by the turn events have taken. If Mr. Michael Vanstone had made his will, there is no doubt she would have received a handsome legacy. She is now left dependent on Mr. Noel Vanstone's sense of gratitude; and she is not at all likely, I should imagine, to let that sense fall asleep for want of a little timely jogging. Whether my fair relative's future intentions in this quarter, point towards Mischief or Money, is more than I can yet say. In either case, I venture to predict that she will find an awkward obstacle in Mrs. Lecount.

So much for my information to the present date. The manner in which it was received by Miss Vanstone, showed the most ungrateful distrust of me. She con-

fided nothing to my private ear, but the expression of her best thanks. A sharp girl—a devilish sharp girl. But there *is* such a thing as bowling a man out once too often; especially when the name of that man happens to be Wragge.

Not a word more about the Entertainment; not a word more about moving from our present quarters. Very good. My right hand lays my left hand a wager. Ten to one, on her opening communications with the son, as she opened them with the father. Ten to one, on her writing to Noel Vanstone before the month is out.

21st.—She has written by to-day's post. A long letter apparently—for she put two stamps on the envelope. (Private memorandum, addressed to myself. Wait for the answer.)

22nd, 23rd, 24th.—(Private memorandum continued. Wait for the answer.)

25th.—The answer has come. As an ex-military man, I have naturally employed stratagem to get at it. The success which rewards all genuine perseverance, has rewarded me—and I have got at it accordingly.

The letter is written, not by Mr. Noel Vanstone, but by Mrs. Lecount. She takes the highest moral ground, in a tone of spiteful politeness. Mr. Noel Vanstone's delicate health and recent bereavement, prevent him from writing himself. Any more letters from Miss Vanstone will be returned unopened. Any personal application will produce an immediate appeal to the protection of the law. Mr. Noel Vanstone,

having been expressly cautioned against Miss Magdalen Vanstone, by his late lamented father, has not yet forgotten his father's advice. Considers it a reflection cast on the memory of the best of men, to suppose that his course of action towards the Miss Vanstones, can be other than the course of action which his father pursued. This is what he has himself instructed Mrs. Lecount to say. She has endeavoured to express herself in the most conciliatory language she could select; she has tried to avoid giving unnecessary pain, by addressing Miss Vanstone (as a matter of courtesy) by the family name; and she trusts these concessions, which speak for themselves, will not be thrown away.—Such is the substance of the letter,—and so it ends.

I draw two conclusions from this little document. First—that it will lead to serious results. Secondly—that Mrs. Lecount, with all her politeness, is a dangerous woman to deal with. I wish I saw my way safe before me. I don't see it yet.

29th.—Miss Vanstone has abandoned my protection; and the whole lucrative future of the dramatic entertainment has abandoned me with her. I am swindled—I, the last man under Heaven who could possibly have expected to write in those disgraceful terms of himself—I AM SWINDLED!

Let me chronicle the events. They exhibit me, for the time being, in a sadly helpless point of view. But the nature of the man prevails: I must have the events down in black and white.

The announcement of her approaching departure was intimated to me yesterday. After another civil speech about the information I had procured at Brighton, she hinted that there was a necessity for pushing our inquiries a little further. I immediately offered to undertake them, as before. "No," she said; "they are not in your way this time. They are inquiries relating to a woman; and I mean to make them myself!" Feeling privately convinced that this new resolution pointed straight at Mrs. Lecount, I tried a few innocent questions on the subject. She quietly declined to answer them. I asked next, when she proposed to leave. She would leave on the twenty-eighth. For what destination? London. For long? Probably not. By herself? No. With me? No. With whom then? With Mrs. Wragge, if I had no objection. Good Heavens! for what possible purpose? For the purpose of getting a respectable lodging, which she could hardly expect to accomplish unless she was accompanied by an elderly female friend. And was I, in the capacity of elderly male friend, to be left out of the business altogether? Impossible to say at present. Was I not even to forward any letters which might come for her at our present address? No: she would make the arrangement herself at the post-office; and she would ask me, at the same time, for an address, at which I could receive a letter from her, in case of necessity for future communication. Further inquiries, after this last answer, could lead to nothing but waste of time. I saved time by putting no more questions.

It was clear to me, that our present position towards each other was what our position had been, previously to the event of Michael Vanstone's death. I returned, as before, to my choice of alternatives. Which way did my private interests point? Towards trusting the chance of her wanting me again? Towards threatening her with the interference of her relatives and friends? Or towards making the information which I possessed a marketable commodity between the wealthy branch of the family and myself? The last of the three was the alternative I had chosen in the case of the father. I chose it once more in the case of the son.

The train started for London nearly four hours since, and took her away in it, accompanied by Mrs. Wragge.

My wife is too great a fool, poor soul, to be actively valuable in the present emergency; but she will be passively useful in keeping up Miss Vanstone's connection with me—and, in consideration of that circumstance, I consent to brush my own trousers, shave my own chin, and submit to the other inconveniences of waiting on myself for a limited period. Any faint glimmerings of sense which Mrs. Wragge may have formerly possessed, appear to have now finally taken their leave of her. On receiving permission to go to London, she favoured us immediately with two inquiries. Might she do some shopping? and might she leave the cookery-book behind her? Miss Vanstone said, Yes, to one question; and I said, Yes, to the other—and from that moment, Mrs. Wragge has existed in a state of perpetual laughter. I am still hoarse with vainly-

repeated applications of vocal stimulant ; and I left her in the railway carriage, to my inexpressible disgust, with *both* shoes down at heel.

Under ordinary circumstances, these absurd particulars would not have dwelt on my memory. But, as matters actually stand, my unfortunate wife's imbecility may, in her present position, lead to consequences which we none of us foresee. She is nothing more or less than a grown-up child ; and I can plainly detect that Miss Vanstone trusts her, as she would not have trusted a sharper woman, on that very account. I know children, little and big, rather better than my fair relative does ; and I say—beware of all forms of human innocence, when it happens to be your interest to keep a secret to yourself.

Let me return to business. Here I am, at two o'clock on a fine summer's afternoon, left entirely alone, to consider the safest means of approaching Mr. Noel Vanstone, on my own account. My private suspicions of his miserly character, produce no discouraging effect on me. I have extracted cheering pecuniary results in my time from people quite as fond of their money as he can be. The real difficulty to contend with is the obstacle of Mrs. Lecount. If I am not mistaken, this lady merits a little serious consideration on my part. I will close my chronicle for to-day, and give Mrs. Lecount her due.

Three o'clock.—I open these pages again, to record a discovery which has taken me entirely by surprise.

After completing the last entry, a circumstance revived in my memory, which I had noticed on escorting the ladies this morning, to the railway. I then remarked that Miss Vanstone had only taken one of her three boxes with her—and it now occurred to me that a private investigation of the luggage she had left behind, might possibly be attended with beneficial results. Having, at certain periods of my life, been in the habit of cultivating friendly terms with strange locks, I found no difficulty in establishing myself on a familiar footing with Miss Vanstone's boxes. One of the two presented nothing to interest me. The other—devoted to the preservation of the costumes, articles of toilette, and other properties used in the dramatic Entertainment—proved to be better worth examining: for it led me straight to the discovery of one of its owner's secrets.

I found all the dresses in the box complete—with one remarkable exception. That exception was the dress of the old North-country lady; the character which I have already mentioned as the best of all my pupil's disguises, and as modelled in voice and manner on her old governess, Miss Garth. The wig; the eyebrows; the bonnet and veil; the cloak, padded inside to disfigure her back and shoulders; the paints and cosmetics used to age her face and alter her complexion—were all gone. Nothing but the gown remained; a gaudily flowered silk, useful enough for dramatic purposes, but too extravagant in colour and pattern to bear inspection by daylight. The other parts of the dress are

sufficiently quiet to pass muster ; the bonnet and veil are only old-fashioned, and the cloak is of a sober grey colour. But one plain inference can be drawn from such a discovery as this. As certainly as I sit here, she is going to open the campaign against Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount, in a character which neither of those two persons can have any possible reason for suspecting at the outset—the character of Miss Garth.

What course am I to take under these circumstances ? Having got her secret, what am I to do with it ? These are awkward considerations ; I am rather puzzled how to deal with them.

It is something more than the mere fact of her choosing to disguise herself to forward her own private ends, that causes my present perplexity. Hundreds of girls take fancies for disguising themselves ; and hundreds of instances of it are related year after year, in the public journals. But my ex-pupil is not to be confounded, for one moment, with the average adventures of the newspapers. She is capable of going a long way beyond the limit of dressing herself like a man, and imitating a man's voice and manner. She has a natural gift for assuming characters, which I have never seen equalled by a woman ; and she has performed in public until she has felt her own power, and trained her talent for disguising herself to the highest pitch. A girl who takes the sharpest people unawares by using such a capacity as this to help her own objects in private life ; and who sharpens that capacity by a determination to fight her way to her own purpose

which has beaten down everything before it, up to this time—is a girl who tries an experiment in deception, new enough and dangerous enough to lead, one way or the other, to very serious results. This is my conviction, founded on a large experience in the art of imposing on my fellow-creatures. I say of my fair relative's enterprise what I never said or thought of it till I introduced myself to the inside of her box. The chances for and against her winning the fight for her lost fortune are now so evenly balanced, that I cannot for the life of me see on which side the scale inclines. All I can discern is, that it will, to a dead certainty, turn one way or the other, on the day when she passes Noel Vanstone's doors in disguise.

Which way do my interests point now? Upon my honour, I don't know.

Five o'clock.—I have effected a masterly compromise; I have decided on turning myself into a Jack-on-both-sides.

By to-day's post I have despatched to London an anonymous letter for Mr. Noel Vanstone. It will be forwarded to its destination by the same means which I successfully adopted to mystify Mr. Pendril; and it will reach Vauxhall Walk, Lambeth, by the afternoon of to-morrow, at the latest.

The letter is short, and to the purpose. It warns Mr. Noel Vanstone, in the most alarming language, that he is destined to become the victim of a conspiracy; and that the prime mover of it is a young

lady who has already held written communication with his father and himself. It offers him the information necessary to secure his own safety, on condition that he makes it worth the writer's while to run the serious personal risk which such a disclosure will entail on him. And it ends by stipulating that the answer shall be advertised in the *Times*; shall be addressed to "An Unknown Friend;" and shall state plainly what remuneration Mr. Noel Vanstone offers for the priceless service which it is proposed to render him.

Unless some unexpected complication occurs, this letter places me exactly in the position which it is my present interest to occupy. If the advertisement appears, and if the remuneration offered is large enough to justify me in going over to the camp of the enemy, over I go. If no advertisement appears, or if Mr. Noel Vanstone rates my invaluable assistance at too low a figure, here I remain, biding my time till my fair relative wants me—or till I make her want me, which comes to the same thing. If the anonymous letter falls by any accident into her hands, she will find disparaging allusions in it to myself, purposely introduced to suggest that the writer must be one of the persons whom I addressed, while conducting her inquiries. If Mrs. Le-count takes the business in hand, and lays a trap for me—I decline her tempting invitation, by becoming totally ignorant of the whole affair the instant any second person appears in it. Let the end come as it may, here I am ready to profit by it: here I am, facing both ways, with perfect ease and security—a moral

agriculturist, with his eye on two crops at once, and his swindler's sickle ready for any emergency.

For the next week to come, the newspaper will be more interesting to me than ever. I wonder which side I shall eventually belong to?



THE THIRD SCENE.



VAUXHALL WALK, LAMBETH.

THE THIRD SCENE



CHAPTER I.

THE old Archiepiscopal Palace of Lambeth, on the southern bank of the Thames—with its Bishop's Walk and Garden, and its terrace fronting the river—is an architectural relic of the London of former times, precious to all lovers of the picturesque, in the utilitarian London of the present day. Southward of this venerable structure lies the street labyrinth of Lambeth; and nearly mid-way in that part of the maze of houses which is placed nearest to the river, runs the dingy double row of buildings, now, as in former days, known by the name of Vauxhall Walk.

The network of dismal streets stretching over the surrounding neighbourhood contains a population for the most part of the poorer order. In the thoroughfares where shops abound, the sordid struggle with poverty shows itself unreservedly on the filthy pavement; gathers its forces through the week; and, strengthening to a tumult on Saturday night, sees the Sunday morn-

ing down in murky gaslight. Miserable women, whose faces never smile, haunt the butchers' shops in such London localities as these, with relics of the men's wages saved from the public-house, clutched fast in their hands, with eyes that devour the meat they dare not buy, with eager fingers that touch it covetously, as the fingers of their richer sisters touch a precious stone. In this district, as in other districts remote from the wealthy quarters of the metropolis, the hideous London vagabond—with the filth of the street outmatched in his speech, with the mud of the street outdirtied in his clothes—lounges, lowering and brutal, at the street corner and the gin-shop door; the public disgrace of his country, the unheeded warning of social troubles that are yet to come. Here, the loud self-assertion of Modern Progress—which has reformed so much in manners, and altered so little in men—meets the flat contradiction that scatters its pretensions to the winds. Here, while the national prosperity feasts, like another Belshazzar, on the spectacle of its own magnificence, is the Writing on the Wall, which warns the monarch, Money, that his glory is weighed in the balance, and his power found wanting.

Situated in such a neighbourhood as this, Vauxhall Walk gains by comparison, and establishes claims to respectability which no impartial observation can fail to recognize. A large proportion of the Walk is still composed of private houses. In the scattered situations where shops appear, those shops are not besieged by the crowds of more populous thoroughfares. Commerce

is not turbulent, nor is the public consumer besieged by loud invitations to "buy." Bird-fanciers have sought the congenial tranquillity of the scene; and pigeons coo, and canaries twitter, in Vauxhall Walk. Second-hand carts and cabs, bedsteads of a certain age, detached carriage wheels for those who may want one to make up a set, are all to be found here in the same repository. One tributary stream in the great flood of gas which illuminates London, tracks its parent source to Works established in this locality. Here, the followers of John Wesley have set up a temple, built before the period of Methodist conversion to the principles of architectural religion. And here—most striking object of all—on the site where thousands of lights once sparkled; where sweet sounds of music made night tuneful till morning dawned; where the beauty and fashion of London feasted and danced through the summer seasons of a century—spreads, at this day, an awful wilderness of mud and rubbish; the deserted dead body of Vauxhall Gardens mouldering in the open air.

On the same day when Captain Wragge completed the last entry in his Chronicle of Events, a woman appeared at the window of one of the houses in Vauxhall Walk, and removed from the glass a printed paper which had been wafered to it, announcing that Apartments were to be let. The apartments consisted of two rooms on the first floor. They had just been taken for a week certain, by two ladies who had paid in

advance—those two ladies being Magdalen and Mrs. Wragge.

As soon as the mistress of the house had left the room, Magdalen walked to the window, and cautiously looked out from it at the row of buildings opposite. They were of superior pretensions in size and appearance to the other houses in the Walk : the date at which they had been erected was inscribed on one of them, and was stated to be the year 1759. They stood back from the pavement, separated from it by little strips of garden ground. This peculiarity of position, added to the breadth of the roadway interposing between them and the smaller houses opposite, made it impossible for Magdalen to see the numbers on the doors, or to observe more of any one who might come to the windows than the bare general outline of dress and figure. Nevertheless, there she stood, anxiously fixing her eyes on one house in the row, nearly opposite to her—the house she had looked for before entering the lodgings ; the house inhabited at that moment by Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount.

After keeping watch at the window, in silence, for ten minutes or more, she suddenly looked back into the room, to observe the effect which her behaviour might have produced on her travelling companion.

Not the slightest cause appeared for any apprehension in that quarter. Mrs. Wragge was seated at the table, absorbed in the arrangement of a series of smart circulars and tempting price-lists, issued by advertising tradespeople, and flung in at the cab-windows as they left

the London terminus. "I've often heard tell of light reading," said Mrs. Wragge, restlessly shifting the positions of the circulars, as a child restlessly shifts the position of a new set of toys. "Here's light reading, printed in pretty colours. Here's all the Things I'm going to buy when I'm out shopping to-morrow. Lend us a pencil; please—you won't be angry, will you?—I do so want to mark 'em off." She looked up at Magdalen, chuckled joyfully over her own altered circumstances, and beat her great hands on the table in irrepressible delight. "No cookery-book!" cried Mrs. Wragge. "No Buzzing in my head! no captain to shave to-morrow! I'm all down at heel; my cap's on one side; and nobody bawls at me. My heart alive, here *is* a holiday and no mistake!" Her hands began to drum on the table louder than ever, until Magdalen quieted them by presenting her with a pencil. Mrs. Wragge instantly recovered her dignity, squared her elbows on the table, and plunged into imaginary shopping for the rest of the evening.

Magdalen returned to the window. She took a chair, seated herself behind the curtain, and steadily fixed her eyes once more on the house opposite.

The blinds were down over the windows of the first floor and the second. The window of the room on the ground floor was uncovered and partly open, but no living creature came near it. Doors opened and people came and went, in the houses on either side; children by the dozen poured out on the pavement to play, and invaded the little strips of garden-ground to recover

lost balls and shuttlecocks ; streams of people passed backwards and forwards perpetually ; heavy waggons piled high with goods, lumbered along the road on their way to, or their way from, the railway station near ; all the daily life of the district stirred with its ceaseless activity in every direction but one. The hours passed—and there was the house opposite, still shut up, still void of any signs of human existence, inside or out. The one object which had decided Magdalen on personally venturing herself in Vauxhall Walk—the object of studying the looks, manners, and habits of Mrs. Lecount and her master from a post of observation known only to herself—was, thus far, utterly defeated. After three hours' watching at the window, she had not even discovered enough to show her that the house was inhabited at all.

Shortly after six o'clock, the landlady disturbed Mrs. Wragge's studies by spreading the cloth for dinner. Magdalen placed herself at the table in a position which still enabled her to command the view from the window. Nothing happened. The dinner came to an end ; Mrs. Wragge (lulled by the narcotic influences of annotating circulars and eating and drinking with an appetite sharpened by the captain's absence) withdrew to an arm-chair, and fell asleep in an attitude which would have caused her husband the acutest mental suffering ; seven o'clock struck ; the shadows of the summer evening lengthened stealthily on the grey pavement and the brown house-walls—and still the closed door opposite remained shut ; still the one

window open, showed nothing but the black blank of the room inside, lifeless and changeless as if that room had been a tomb.

Mrs. Wragge's meek snoring deepened in tone ; the evening wore on drearily ; it was close on eight o'clock—when an event happened at last. The street-door opposite opened for the first time, and a woman appeared on the threshold.

Was the woman Mrs. Lecount? No. As she came nearer, her dress showed her to be a servant. She had a large door-key in her hand, and was evidently going out to perform an errand. Roused, partly by curiosity—partly by the impulse of the moment, which urged her impetuous nature into action, after the passive endurance of many hours past—Magdalen snatched up her bonnet, and determined to follow the servant to her destination, wherever it might be.

The woman led her to the great thoroughfare of shops close at hand, called Lambeth Walk. After proceeding some little distance, and looking about her with the hesitation of a person not well acquainted with the neighbourhood, the servant crossed the road, and entered a stationer's shop. Magdalen crossed the road after her, and followed her in.

The inevitable delay in entering the shop under these circumstances, made Magdalen too late to hear what the woman asked for. The first words spoken, however, by the man behind the counter, reached her ears, and informed her that the servant's object was to buy a railway guide.

“Do you mean a Guide for this month? or a Guide for July?” asked the shopman, addressing his customer.

“Master didn’t tell me which,” answered the woman. “All I know is, he’s going into the country the day after to-morrow.”

“The day after to-morrow is the first of July,” said the shopman. “The Guide your master wants, is the Guide for the new month. It won’t be published till to-morrow.”

Engaging to call again on the next day, the servant left the shop, and took the way that led back to Vauxhall Walk.

Magdalen purchased the first trifle she saw on the counter, and hastily returned in the same direction. The discovery she had just made was of very serious importance to her; and she felt the necessity of acting on it with as little delay as possible.

On entering the front room at the lodgings, she found Mrs. Wragge just awake, lost in drowsy bewilderment, with her cap fallen off on her shoulders, and with one of her shoes missing altogether. Magdalen endeavoured to persuade her that she was tired after her journey, and that her wisest proceeding would be to go to bed. Mrs. Wragge was perfectly willing to profit by this suggestion, provided she could find her shoe first. In looking for the shoe, she unfortunately discovered the circulars, put by on a side table; and forthwith recovered her recollection of the earlier proceedings of the evening.

“Give us the pencil,” said Mrs. Wragge, shuffling the circulars in a violent hurry. “I can’t go to bed yet—I haven’t half done marking down the things I want. Let’s see; where did I leave off? *Try Finch’s feeding-bottle for Infants*. No! there’s a cross against that: the cross means I don’t want it. *Comfort in the Field*. *Buckler’s Indestructible Hunting Breeches*. Oh, dear, dear! I’ve lost the place. No, I haven’t. Here it is; here’s my mark against it. *Elegant Cashmere Robes; strictly oriental, very grand; reduced to one pound, nineteen, and sixpence*. *Be in time*. *Only three left*. Only three! Oh, do lend us the money and let’s go and get one!”

“Not to-night,” said Magdalen. “Suppose you go to bed now, and finish the circulars to-morrow? I will put them by the bedside for you, and you can go on with them as soon as you wake, the first thing in the morning.”

This suggestion met with Mrs. Wragge’s immediate approval. Magdalen took her into the next room, and put her to bed like a child—with her toys by her side. The room was so narrow, and the bed was so small; and Mrs. Wragge, arrayed in the white apparel proper for the occasion, with her moon face framed round by a spacious halo of night-cap—looked so hugely and disproportionately large, that Magdalen, anxious as she was, could not repress a smile on taking leave of her travelling companion for the night.

“Aha!” cried Mrs. Wragge, cheerfully; “we’ll have that Cashmere Robe to-morrow. Come here! I

want to whisper something to you. Just you look at me—I'm going to sleep crooked, and the captain's not here to bawl at me !”

The front room at the lodgings contained a sofa bedstead, which the landlady arranged betimes for the night. This done, and the candles brought in, Magdalen was left alone to shape her future course, as her own thoughts counselled her.

The questions and answers which had passed in her presence that evening, at the stationer's shop, led plainly to the conclusion that one day more would bring Noel Vanstone's present term of residence in Vauxhall Walk to an end. Her first cautious resolution to pass many days together in unsuspected observation of the house opposite, before she ventured herself inside, was entirely frustrated by the turn events had taken. She was placed in the dilemma of running all risks headlong on the next day—or of pausing for a future opportunity, which might never occur. There was no middle course open to her. Until she had seen Noel Vanstone with her own eyes, and had discovered the worst there was to fear from Mrs. Lecount—until she had achieved this double object, with the needful precaution of keeping her own identity carefully in the dark—not a step could she advance towards the accomplishment of the purpose which had brought her to London.

One after another, the minutes of the night passed away ; one after another, the thronging thoughts fol-

lowed each other over her mind—and still she reached no conclusion; still she faltered and doubted, with a hesitation new to her in her experience of herself. At last she crossed the room impatiently to seek the trivial relief of unlocking her trunk, and taking from it the few things that she wanted for the night. Captain Wragge's suspicions had not misled him. There, hidden between two dresses, were the articles of costume which he had missed from her box at Birmingham. She turned them over one by one, to satisfy herself that nothing she wanted had been forgotten, and returned once more to her post of observation by the window.

The house opposite was dark down to the parlour. There, the blind, previously raised, was now drawn over the window: the light burning behind it, showed her for the first time that the room was inhabited. Her eyes brightened, and her colour rose as she looked at it.

“There he is!” she said to herself, in a low angry whisper. “There he lives on our money, in the house that his father's warning has closed against me!” She dropped the blind which she had raised to look out; returned to her trunk; and took from it the grey wig which was part of her dramatic costume, in the character of the north-country lady. The wig had been crumpled in packing; she put it on, and went to the toilette table to comb it out. “His father has warned him against Magdalen Vanstone,” she said, repeating

the passage in Mrs. Lccount's letter, and laughing bitterly, as she looked at herself in the glass. "I wonder whether his father has warned him against Miss Garth? To-morrow is sooner than I bargained for. No matter: to-morrow shall show."

CHAPTER II.

THE early morning, when Magdalen rose and looked out, was cloudy and overcast. But as time advanced to the breakfast hour, the threatening of rain passed away ; and she was free to provide, without hindrance from the weather, for the first necessity of the day—the necessity of securing the absence of her travelling companion from the house.

Mrs. Wragge was dressed, armed at all points with her collection of circulars, and eager to be away by ten o'clock. At an earlier hour Magdalen had provided for her being properly taken care of by the landlady's eldest daughter,—a quiet, well-conducted girl, whose interest in the shopping expedition was readily secured by a little present of money for the purchase, on her own account, of a parasol and a muslin dress. Shortly after ten o'clock, Magdalen dismissed Mrs. Wragge and her attendant in a cab. She then joined the landlady—who was occupied in setting the rooms in order upstairs—with the object of ascertaining by a little well-timed gossip, what the daily habits might be of the inmates of the house.

She discovered that there were no other lodgers but

Mrs. Wragge and herself. The landlady's husband was away all day, employed at a railway station. Her second daughter was charged with the care of the kitchen, in the elder sister's absence. The younger children were at school, and would be back at one o'clock to dinner. The landlady herself "got up fine linen for ladies," and expected to be occupied over her work all that morning, in a little room built out at the back of the premises. Thus, there was every facility for Magdalen's leaving the house in disguise, and leaving it unobserved; provided she went out before the children came back to dinner at one o'clock.

By eleven o'clock the apartments were set in order, and the landlady had retired to pursue her own employments. Magdalen softly locked the door of her room; drew the blind over the window, and entered at once on her preparations for the perilous experiment of the day.

The same quick perception of dangers to be avoided, and difficulties to be overcome, which had warned her to leave the extravagant part of her character costume in the box at Birmingham, now kept her mind fully alive to the vast difference between a disguise worn by gaslight, for the amusement of an audience, and a disguise assumed by daylight to deceive the searching eyes of two strangers. The first article of dress which she put on was an old gown of her own (made of the material called "alpaca"), of a dark-brown colour, with a neat pattern of little star-shaped spots in white. A double flounce running round the bottom of this

dress was the only milliner's ornament which it presented—an ornament not at all out of character with the costume appropriate to an elderly lady. The disguise of her head and face was the next object of her attention. She fitted and arranged the grey wig with the dexterity which constant practice had given her; fixed the false eyebrows (made rather large, and of hair darker than the wig) carefully in their position, with the gum she had with her for the purpose, and stained her face, with the customary stage materials, so as to change the transparent fairness of her complexion to the dull, faintly opaque colour of a woman in ill-health. The lines and markings of age followed next; and here the first obstacles presented themselves. The art which succeeded by gaslight failed by day: the difficulty of hiding the plainly artificial nature of the marks was almost insuperable. She turned to her trunk; took from it two veils; and putting on her old-fashioned bonnet, tried the effect of them in succession. One of the veils (of black lace) was too thick to be worn over the face at that summer season, without exciting remark. The other, of plain net, allowed her features to be seen through it, just indistinctly enough to permit the safe introduction of certain lines (many fewer than she was accustomed to use in performing the character) on the forehead and at the sides of the mouth. But the obstacle thus set aside only opened the way to a new difficulty—the difficulty of keeping her veil down while she was speaking to other persons, without any obvious reason for doing so. An instant's

consideration, and a chance look at her little china palette of stage colours, suggested to her ready invention the production of a visible excuse for wearing her veil. She deliberately disfigured herself by artificially reddening the insides of her eyelids, so as to produce an appearance of inflammation which no human creature but a doctor—and that doctor at close quarters—could have detected as false. She sprang to her feet, and looked triumphantly at the hideous transformation of herself reflected in the glass. Who could think it strange now if she wore her veil down, and if she begged Mrs. Lecount's permission to sit with her back to the light?

Her last proceeding was to put on the quiet grey cloak, which she had brought from Birmingham, and which had been padded inside by Captain Wragge's own experienced hands, so as to hide the youthful grace and beauty of her back and shoulders. Her costume being now complete, she practised the walk which had been originally taught her as appropriate to the character—a walk with a slight limp—and, returning to the glass, after a minute's trial, exercised herself next in the disguise of her voice and manner. This was the only part of the character in which it had been possible, with her physical peculiarities, to produce an imitation of Miss Garth; and here the resemblance was perfect. The harsh voice, the blunt manner, the habit of accompanying certain phrases by an emphatic nod of the head, the Northumbrian *burr* expressing itself in every word which contained the letter “r”—

all these personal peculiarities of the old north-country governess were reproduced to the life. The personal transformation thus completed, was literally what Captain Wragge had described it to be—a triumph in the art of self-disguise. Excepting the one case of seeing her face close, with a strong light on it, nobody who now looked at Magdalen could have suspected for an instant that she was other than an ailing, ill-made, unattractive woman of fifty years old at least.

Before unlocking the door she looked about her carefully, to make sure that none of her stage materials were exposed to view, in case the landlady entered the room in her absence. The only forgotten object belonging to her that she discovered was a little packet of Norah's letters, which she had been reading overnight, and which had been accidentally pushed under the looking-glass while she was engaged in dressing herself. As she took up the letters to put them away, the thought struck her for the first time—"Would Norah know me now if we met each other in the street?" She looked in the glass, and smiled sadly. "No," she said, "not even Norah."

She unlocked the door, after first looking at her watch. It was close on twelve o'clock. There was barely an hour left to try her desperate experiment, and to return to the lodging before the landlady's children came back from school.

An instant's listening on the landing assured her that all was quiet in the passage below. She noiselessly descended the stairs, and gained the street without

having met any living creature on her way out of the house. In another minute she had crossed the road, and had knocked at Noel Vanstone's door.

The door was opened by the same woman servant whom she had followed on the previous evening to the stationer's shop. With a momentary tremor, which recalled the memorable first night of her appearance in public, Magdalen inquired (in Miss Garth's voice, and with Miss Garth's manner), for Mrs. Lecount.

"Mrs. Lecount has gone out, ma'am," said the servant.

"Is Mr. Vanstone at home?" asked Magdalen, her resolution asserting itself at once against the first obstacle that opposed it.

"My master is not up yet, ma'am."

Another check! A weaker nature would have accepted the warning. Magdalen's nature rose in revolt against it.

"What time will Mrs. Lecount be back?" she asked.

"About one o'clock, ma'am."

"Say, if you please, that I will call again, as soon after one o'clock as possible. I particularly wish to see Mrs. Lecount. My name is Miss Garth."

She turned and left the house. Going back to her own room was out of the question. The servant (as Magdalen knew by not hearing the door close), was looking after her; and, moreover, she would expose herself, if she went indoors, to the risk of going out again exactly at the time when the landlady's children were sure to be about the house. She turned me-

chanically to the right; walked on until she reached Vauxhall Bridge; and waited there, looking out over the river.

The interval of unemployed time now before her was nearly an hour. How should she occupy it?

As she asked herself the question, the thought which had struck her when she put away the packet of Norah's letters, rose in her mind once more. A sudden impulse to test the miserable completeness of her disguise, mixed with the higher and purer feeling at her heart; and strengthened her natural longing to see her sister's face again, though she dare not discover herself and speak. Norah's later letters had described, in the fullest detail, her life as a governess—her hours for teaching, her hours of leisure, her hours for walking out with her pupils. There was just time, if she could find a vehicle at once, for Magdalen to drive to the house of Norah's employer, with the chance of getting there a few minutes before the hour when her sister would be going out. "One look at her will tell me more than a hundred letters!" With that thought in her heart: with the one object of following Norah on her daily walk, under protection of the disguise, Magdalen hastened over the bridge, and made for the northern bank of the river.

So, at the turning point of her life—so, in the interval before she took the irrevocable step, and passed the threshold of Noel Vanstone's door—the forces of Good triumphing in the strife for her over the forces of Evil, turned her back on the scene

of her meditated deception, and hurried her mercifully farther and farther away from the fatal house.

She stopped the first empty cab that passed her; told the driver to go to New Street, Spring Gardens; and promised to double his fare if he reached his destination by a given time. The man earned the money—more than earned it, as the event proved. Magdalen had not taken ten steps in advance along New Street, walking towards St. James's Park, before the door of a house beyond her opened, and a lady in mourning came out, accompanied by two little girls. The lady also took the direction of the Park, without turning her head towards Magdalen, as she descended the house step. It mattered little; Magdalen's heart looked through her eyes, and told her that she saw Norah.

She followed them into St. James's Park, and thence (along the Mall) into the Green Park, venturing closer and closer as they reached the grass and ascended the rising ground in the direction of Hyde Park Corner. Her eager eyes devoured every detail in Norah's dress, and detected the slightest change that had taken place in her figure and her bearing. She had become thinner since the autumn—her head drooped a little; she walked wearily. Her mourning dress, worn with the modest grace and neatness which no misfortune could take from her, was suited to her altered station; her black gown was made of stuff; her black shawl and bonnet were of the plainest and cheapest kind. The

two little girls, walking on either side of her, were dressed in silk. Magdalen instinctively hated them.

She made a wide circuit on the grass, so as to turn gradually and meet her sister, without exciting suspicion that the meeting was contrived. Her heart beat fast; a burning heat glowed in her as she thought of her false hair, her false colour, her false dress, and saw the dear familiar face coming nearer and nearer. They passed each other close. Norah's dark gentle eyes looked up, with a deeper light in them, with a sadder beauty, than of old—rested all unconscious of the truth on her sister's face—and looked away from it again, as from the face of a stranger. That glance of an instant struck Magdalen to the heart. She stood rooted to the ground, after Norah had passed by. A horror of the vile disguise that concealed her; a yearning to burst its trammels and hide her shameful painted face on Norah's bosom, took possession of her, body and soul. She turned and looked back.

Norah and the two children had reached the higher ground, and were close to one of the gates in the iron railing which fenced the Park from the street. Drawn by an irresistible fascination, Magdalen followed them again, gained on them as they reached the gate, and heard the voices of the two children raised in angry dispute which way they wanted to walk next. She saw Norah take them through the gate, and then stoop and speak to them, while waiting for an opportunity to cross the road. They only grew the louder and the angrier for what she said. The youngest—a girl of eight or nine

years old—flew into a child's vehement passion, cried, screamed, and even kicked at the governess. The people in the street stopped and laughed; some of them jestingly advised a little wholesome correction; one woman asked Norah if she was the child's mother; another pitied her audibly for being the child's governess. Before Magdalen could push her way through the crowd—before her all-mastering anxiety to help her sister had blinded her to every other consideration, and had brought her, self-betrayed, to Norah's side—an open carriage passed the pavement slowly, hindered in its progress by the press of vehicles before it. An old lady seated inside heard the child's cries, recognized Norah, and called to her immediately. The footman parted the crowd, and the children were put into the carriage. "It's lucky I happened to pass this way," said the old lady, beckoning contemptuously to Norah to take her place on the front seat; "you never could manage my daughter's children, and you never will." The footman put up the steps—the carriage drove on with the children and the governess—the crowd dispersed—and Magdalen was alone again.

"So be it!" she thought bitterly. "I should only have distressed her. We should only have had the misery of parting to suffer again."

She mechanically retraced her steps; she returned, as in a dream, to the open space of the Park. Arming itself treacherously with the strength of her love for her sister, with the vehemence of the indignation that she felt for her sister's sake, the terrible temptation of

her life fastened its hold on her more firmly than ever. Through all the paint and disfigurement of the disguise, the fierce despair of that strong and passionate nature lowered haggard and horrible. Norah made an object of public curiosity and amusement; Norah reprimanded in the open street; Norah the hired victim of an old woman's insolence, and a child's ill-temper—and the same man to thank for it who had sent Frank to China!—and that man's son to thank after him! The thought of her sister, which had turned her from the scene of her meditated deception, which had made the consciousness of her own disguise hateful to her—was now the thought which sanctioned that means, or any means, to compass her end; the thought which set wings to her feet, and hurried her back nearer and nearer to the fatal house.

She left the Park again; and found herself in the streets, without knowing where. Once more she hailed the first cab that passed her—and told the man to drive to Vauxhall Walk.

The change from walking to riding quieted her. She felt her attention returning to herself and her dress. The necessity of making sure that no accident had happened to her disguise, in the interval since she had left her own room, impressed itself immediately on her mind. She stopped the driver at the first pastry-cook's shop which he passed, and there obtained the means of consulting a looking-glass before she ventured back to Vauxhall Walk.

Her grey head-dress was disordered, and the old-fashioned bonnet was a little on one side. Nothing else had suffered. She set right the few defects in her costume, and returned to the cab. It was half-past one, when she approached the house, and knocked, for the second time, at Noel Vanstone's door. The woman-servant opened it, as before.

“Has Mrs. Lecount come back?”

“Yes, ma'am. Step this way, if you please.”

The servant preceded Magdalen along an empty passage; and, leading her past an uncarpeted staircase, opened the door of a room at the back of the house. The room was lighted by one window looking out on a yard; the walls were bare; the boarded floor was uncovered. Two bedroom chairs stood against the wall, and a kitchen-table was placed under the window. On the table stood a glass tank filled with water; and ornamented in the middle by a miniature pyramid of rock-work interlaced with weeds. Snails clung to the sides of the tank; tadpoles and tiny fish swam swiftly in the green water; slippery efts and slimy frogs twined their noiseless way in and out of the weedy rock-work—and, on top of the pyramid, there sat solitary, cold as the stone, brown as the stone, motionless as the stone, a little bright-eyed toad. The art of keeping fish and reptiles as domestic pets had not at that time been popularized in England; and Magdalen, on entering the room, started back, in irrepressible astonishment and disgust, from the first specimen of an Aquarium that she had ever seen.

“Don’t be alarmed,” said a woman’s voice behind her. “My pets hurt nobody.”

Magdalen turned, and confronted Mrs. Lecount. She had expected—founding her anticipations on the letter which the housekeeper had written to her—to see a hard, wily, ill-favoured, insolent old woman. She found herself in the presence of a lady of mild ingratiating manners; whose dress was the perfection of neatness, taste, and matronly simplicity; whose personal appearance was little less than a triumph of physical resistance to the deteriorating influence of time. If Mrs. Lecount had struck some fifteen or sixteen years off her real age, and had asserted herself to be eight-and-thirty, there would not have been one man in a thousand, or one woman in a hundred, who would have hesitated to believe her. Her dark hair was just turning to grey, and no more. It was plainly parted under a spotless lace cap, sparingly ornamented with mourning ribbons. Not a wrinkle appeared on her smooth white forehead, or her plump white cheeks. Her double chin was dimpled, and her teeth were marvels of whiteness and regularity. Her lips might have been critically considered as too thin, if they had not been accustomed to make the best of their defects by means of a pleading and persuasive smile. Her large black eyes might have looked fierce if they had been set in the face of another woman: they were mild and melting in the face of Mrs. Lecount; they were tenderly interested in everything she looked at—in Magdalen, in the toad on the rock-work, in the back-

yard view from the window ; in her own plump fair hands, which she rubbed softly one over the other while she spoke ; in her own pretty cambric chemisette, which she had a habit of looking at complacently while she listened to others. The elegant black gown in which she mourned the memory of Michael Vaustone, was not a mere dress—it was a well-made compliment paid to Death. Her innocent white muslin apron was a little domestic poem in itself. Her jet earrings were so modest in their pretensions, that a Quaker might have looked at them, and committed no sin. The comely plumpness of her face was matched by the comely plumpness of her figure : it glided smoothly over the ground ; it flowed in sedate undulations when she walked. There are not many men who could have observed Mrs. Lecount entirely from the Platonic point of view—lads in their teens would have found her irresistible—women only could have hardened their hearts against her, and mercilessly forced their way inwards through that fair and smiling surface. Magdalen's first glance at this Venus of the autumn period of female life, more than satisfied her that she had done well to feel her ground in disguise, before she ventured on matching herself against Mrs. Lecount.

“Have I the pleasure of addressing the lady who called this morning?” inquired the housekeeper. “Am I speaking to Miss Garth?”

Something in the expression of her eyes, as she asked that question, warned Magdalen to turn her face farther inwards from the window than she had turned

it yet. The bare doubt whether the housekeeper might not have seen her already under too strong a light, shook her self-possession for the moment. She gave herself time to recover it, and merely answered by a bow.

“Accept my excuses, ma’am, for the place in which I am compelled to receive you,” proceeded Mrs. Lecount, in fluent English, spoken with a foreign accent. “Mr. Vanstone is only here for a temporary purpose. We leave for the sea-side to-morrow afternoon; and it has not been thought worth while to set the house in proper order. Will you take a seat, and oblige me by mentioning the object of your visit?”

She glided imperceptibly a step or two nearer to Magdalen, and placed a chair for her exactly opposite the light from the window. “Pray sit down,” said Mrs. Lecount, looking with the tenderest interest at the visitor’s inflamed eyes, through the visitor’s net veil.

“I am suffering, as you see, from a complaint in the eyes,” replied Magdalen, steadily keeping her profile towards the window, and carefully pitching her voice to the tone of Miss Garth’s. “I must beg your permission to wear my veil down, and to sit away from the light.” She said those words, feeling mistress of herself again. With perfect composure she drew the chair back into the corner of the room beyond the window; and seated herself, keeping the shadow of her bonnet well over her face. Mrs. Lecount’s persuasive lips murmured a polite expression of sympathy; Mrs.

Lecount's amiable black eyes looked more interested in the strange lady than ever. She placed a chair for herself exactly on a line with Magdalen's, and sat so close to the wall as to force her visitor either to turn her head a little further round towards the window, or to fail in politeness by not looking at the person whom she addressed. "Yes," said Mrs. Lecount, with a confidential little cough. "And to what circumstances am I indebted for the honour of this visit?"

"May I inquire, first, if my name happens to be familiar to you?" said Magdalen, turning towards her as a matter of necessity—but coolly holding up her handkerchief, at the same time, between her face and the light.

"No," answered Mrs. Lecount, with another little cough, rather harsher than the first. "The name of Miss Garth is not familiar to me."

"In that case," pursued Magdalen, "I shall best explain the object that causes me to intrude on you, by mentioning who I am. I lived for many years, as governess, in the family of the late Mr. Andrew Vanstone, of Combe-Raven; and I come here in the interest of his orphan daughters."

Mrs. Lecount's hands, which had been smoothly sliding one over the other, up to this time, suddenly stopped; and Mrs. Lecount's lips self-forgetfully shutting up, owned they were too thin at the very outset of the interview.

"I am surprised you can bear the light out of doors, without a green shade," she quietly remarked; leaving

the false Miss Garth's announcement of herself as completely unnoticed as if she had not spoken at all.

"I find a shade over my eyes keeps them too hot at this time of the year," rejoined Magdalen, steadily matching the housekeeper's composure. "May I ask whether you heard what I said just now on the subject of my errand in this house?"

"May I inquire, on my side, ma'am, in what way that errand can possibly concern *me*?" retorted Mrs. Lecount.

"Certainly," said Magdalen. "I come to you because Mr. Noel Vanstone's intentions towards the two young ladies, were made known to them in the form of a letter from yourself."

That plain answer had its effect. It warned Mrs. Lecount that the strange lady was better informed than she had at first suspected, and that it might hardly be wise, under the circumstances, to dismiss her unheard.

"Pray pardon me," said the housekeeper, "I scarcely understood before; I perfectly understand now. You are mistaken, ma'am, in supposing that I am of any importance, or that I exercise any influence in this painful matter. I am the mouthpiece of Mr. Noel Vanstone; the pen he holds, if you will excuse the expression—nothing more. He is an invalid; and like other invalids, he has his bad days and his good. It was his bad day, when that answer was written to the young person——, shall I call her Miss Vanstone? I will, with pleasure, poor girl; for who am I to make

distinctions, and what is it to me whether her parents were married or not? As I was saying, it was one of Mr. Noel Vanstone's bad days, when that answer was sent, and therefore I had to write it; simply as his secretary, for want of a better. If you wish to speak on the subject of these young ladies——, shall I call them young ladies, as you did just now? no, poor things, I will call them the Miss Vanstones.—If you wish to speak on the subject of these Miss Vanstones, I will mention your name, and your object in favouring me with this call, to Mr. Noel Vanstone. He is alone in the parlour, and this is one of his good days. I have the influence of an old servant over him; and I will use that influence with pleasure in your behalf. Shall I go at once?" asked Mrs. Lecount, rising with the friendliest anxiety to make herself useful.

"If you please," replied Magdalen; "and if I am not taking any undue advantage of your kindness."

"On the contrary," rejoined Mrs. Lecount, "you are laying me under an obligation—you are permitting me, in my very limited way, to assist the performance of a benevolent action." She bowed, smiled, and glided out of the room.

Left by herself, Magdalen allowed the anger which she had suppressed in Mrs. Lecount's presence to break free from her. For want of a nobler object of attack, it took the direction of the toad. The sight of the hideous little reptile sitting placid on his rock throne, with his bright eyes staring impenetrably into

vacancy, irritated every nerve in her body. She looked at the creature with a shrinking intensity of hatred; she whispered at it maliciously through her set teeth. "I wonder whose blood runs coldest," she said, "yours, you little monster, or Mrs. Lecount's? I wonder which is the slimiest, her heart or your back? You hateful wretch, do you know what your mistress is? Your mistress is a devil!"

The speckled skin under the toad's mouth mysteriously wrinkled itself, then slowly expanded again, as if he had swallowed the words just addressed to him. Magdalen started back in disgust from the first perceptible movement in the creature's body, trifling as it was, and returned to her chair. She had not seated herself again a moment too soon. The door opened noiselessly, and Mrs. Lecount appeared once more.

"Mr. Vanstone will see you," she said, "if you will kindly wait a few minutes. He will ring the parlour bell when his present occupation is at an end, and he is ready to receive you. Be careful, ma'am, not to depress his spirits, or to agitate him in any way. His heart has been a cause of serious anxiety to those about him, from his earliest years. There is no positive disease; there is only a chronic feebleness—a fatty degeneration—a want of vital power in the organ itself. His heart will go on well enough if you don't give his heart too much to do—that is the advice of all the medical men who have seen him. You will not forget it, and you will keep a guard over your conversation

accordingly. Talking of medical men, have you ever tried the Golden Ointment for that sad affliction in your eyes? It has been described to me as an excellent remedy."

"It has not succeeded in my case," replied Magdalen, sharply. "Before I see Mr. Noel Vanstone," she continued, "may I inquire——"

"I beg your pardon," interposed Mrs. Lecount. "Does your question refer in any way to those two poor girls?"

"It refers to the Miss Vanstones."

"Then I can't enter into it. Excuse me, I really can't discuss these poor girls (I am so glad to hear you call them the Miss Vanstones!) except in my master's presence, and by my master's express permission. Let us talk of something else while we are waiting here. Will you notice my glass Tank? I have every reason to believe that it is a perfect novelty in England."

"I looked at the Tank while you were out of the room," said Magdalen.

"Did you? You take no interest in the subject, I dare say? Quite natural. I took no interest either until I was married. My dear husband—dead many years since—formed my tastes, and elevated me to himself. You have heard of the late Professor Lecomte, the eminent Swiss naturalist? I am his widow. The English circle at Zurich (where I lived in my late master's service) Anglicised my name to Lecount. Your generous country people will have nothing foreign about them—not even a name, if they

can help it. But I was speaking of my husband—my dear husband, who permitted me to assist him in his pursuits. I have had only one interest since his death—an interest in science. Eminent in many things, the Professor was great at reptiles. He left me his Subjects and his Tank. I had no other legacy. There is the Tank. All the Subjects died but this quiet little fellow—this nice little toad. Are you surprised at my liking him? There is nothing to be surprised at. The Professor lived long enough to elevate me above the common prejudice against the reptile creation. Properly understood, the reptile creation is beautiful. Properly dissected, the reptile creation is instructive in the last degree.” She stretched out her little finger, and gently stroked the toad’s back with the tip of it. “So refreshing to the touch,” said Mrs. Lecount. “So nice and cool this summer weather!”

The bell from the parlour rang. Mrs. Lecount rose, bent fondly over the Aquarium, and chirruped to the toad at parting as if it had been a bird. “Mr. Vanstone is ready to receive you. Follow me, if you please, Miss Garth.” With these words she opened the door, and led the way out of the room.

CHAPTER III.

“MISS GARTH, sir,” said Mrs. Lecount, opening the parlour door, and announcing the visitor’s appearance, with the tone and manner of a well-bred servant.

Magdalen found herself in a long, narrow room—consisting of a back parlour and a front parlour, which had been thrown into one by opening the folding doors between them. Seated not far from the front window, with his back to the light, she saw a frail, flaxen-haired, self-satisfied little man, clothed in a fair white dressing-gown, many sizes too large for him, with a nosegay of violets drawn neatly through the button-hole over his breast. He looked from thirty to five-and-thirty years old. His complexion was as delicate as a young girl’s, his eyes were of the lightest blue, his upper lip was adorned by a weak little white moustache, waxed and twisted at either end into a thin spiral curl. When any object specially attracted his attention, he half closed his eyelids to look at it. When he smiled, the skin at his temples crumpled itself up into a nest of wicked little wrinkles. He had a plate of strawberries on his lap, with a napkin under them to preserve the purity of his white dressing-gown. At his right hand stood a large round table, covered

with a collection of foreign curiosities, which seemed to have been brought together from the four quarters of the globe. Stuffed birds from Africa, porcelain monsters from China, silver ornaments and utensils from India and Peru, mosaic work from Italy, and bronzes from France—were all heaped together, pell-mell, with the coarse deal boxes and dingy leather cases which served to pack them for travelling. The little man apologized, with a cheerful and simpering conceit, for his litter of curiosities, his dressing-gown, and his delicate health; and, waving his hand towards a chair, placed his attention, with pragmatical politeness, at the visitor's disposal. Magdalen looked at him with a momentary doubt whether Mrs. Lecount had not deceived her. Was this the man who mercilessly followed the path on which his merciless father had walked before him? She could hardly believe it. "Take a seat, Miss Garth," he repeated; observing her hesitation, and announcing his own name, in a high, thin, fretfully-consequential voice: "I am Mr. Noel Vanstone. You wished to see me—here I am!"

"May I be permitted to retire, sir?" inquired Mrs. Lecount.

"Certainly not!" replied her master. "Stay here, Lecount, and keep us company. Mrs. Lecount has my fullest confidence," he continued, addressing Magdalen. "Whatever you say to me, ma'am, you say to her. She is a domestic treasure. There is not another house in England has such a treasure as Mrs. Lecount."

The housekeeper listened to the praise of her do-

mestic virtues with eyes immovably fixed on her elegant chemisette. But Magdalen's quick penetration had previously detected a look that passed between Mrs. Lecount and her master, which suggested that Noel Vanstone had been instructed beforehand, what to say and do in his visitor's presence. The suspicion of this—and the obstacles which the room presented to arranging her position in it so as to keep her face from the light—warned Magdalen to be on her guard.

She had taken her chair at first nearly midway in the room. An instant's after-reflection induced her to move her seat towards the left hand, so as to place herself just inside, and close against, the left post of the folding door. In this position, she dexterously barred the only passage by which Mrs. Lecount could have skirted round the large table, and contrived to front Magdalen by taking a chair at her master's side. On the right hand of the table the empty space was well occupied by the fireplace and fender, by some travelling trunks and a large packing-case. There was no alternative left for Mrs. Lecount but to place herself on a line with Magdalen, against the opposite post of the folding door—or to push rudely past the visitor, with the obvious intention of getting in front of her. With an expressive little cough, and with one steady look at her master, the housekeeper conceded the point, and took her seat against the right-hand door-post. "Wait a little," thought Mrs. Lecount, "my turn next!"

"Mind what you are about, ma'am!" cried Noel

Vanstone, as Magdalen accidentally approached the table, in moving her chair. "Mind the sleeve of your cloak! Excuse me, you nearly knocked down that silver candlestick. Pray don't suppose it's a common candlestick. It's nothing of the sort—it's a Peruvian candlestick. There are only three of that pattern in the world. One is in the possession of the President of Peru; one is locked up in the Vatican; and one is on My table. It cost ten pounds; it's worth fifty. One of my father's bargains, ma'am. All these things are my father's bargains. There is not another house in England which has such curiosities as these. Sit down, Lecount; I beg you will make yourself comfortable. Mrs. Lecount is like the curiosities, Miss Garth—she is one of my father's bargains. You are one of my father's bargains, are you not, Lecount? My father was a remarkable man, ma'am. You will be reminded of him here, at every turn. I have got his dressing-gown on at this moment. No such linen as this is made now—you can't get it for love or money. Would you like to feel the texture? Perhaps you're no judge of texture? Perhaps you would prefer talking to me about these two pupils of yours? They are two, are they not? Are they fine girls? Plump, fresh, full-blown English beauties?"

"Excuse me, sir," interposed Mrs. Lecount sorrowfully. "I must really beg permission to retire if you speak of the poor things in that way. I can't sit by, sir, and hear them turned into ridicule. Consider their position; consider Miss Garth."

“You good creature!” said Noel Vanstone, surveying the housekeeper through his half-closed eyelids. “You excellent Lecount! I assure you, ma’am, Mrs. Lecount is a worthy creature. You will observe that she pities the two girls. I don’t go so far as that myself—but I can make allowances for them. I am a large-minded man. I can make allowances for them and for you.” He smiled with the most cordial politeness, and helped himself to a strawberry from the dish on his lap.

“You shock Miss Garth; indeed, sir, without meaning it, you shock Miss Garth,” remonstrated Mrs. Lecount. “She is not accustomed to you as I am. Consider Miss Garth, sir. As a favour to *me*, consider Miss Garth.”

Thus far, Magdalen had resolutely kept silence. The burning anger which would have betrayed her in an instant if she had let it flash its way to the surface, throbbed fast and fiercely at her heart, and warned her, while Noel Vanstone was speaking, to close her lips. She would have allowed him to talk on uninterrupted for some minutes more, if Mrs. Lecount had not interfered for the second time. The refined insolence of the housekeeper’s pity, was a woman’s insolence; and it stung her into instantly controlling herself. She had never more admirably imitated Miss Garth’s voice and manner, than when she spoke her next words.

“You are very good,” she said to Mrs. Lecount. “I make no claim to be treated with any extraordinary

consideration. I am a governess, and I don't expect it. I have only one favour to ask. I beg Mr. Noel Vanstone, for his own sake, to hear what I have to say to him."

"You understand, sir?" observed Mrs. Lecount. "It appears that Miss Garth has some serious warning to give you. She says you are to hear her, for your own sake."

Mr. Noel Vanstone's fair complexion suddenly turned white. He put away the plate of strawberries among his father's bargains. His hand shook, and his little figure twisted itself uneasily in the chair. Magdalen observed him attentively. "One discovery already," she thought; "he is a coward!"

"What do you mean, ma'am?" asked Noel Vanstone, with visible trepidation of look and manner. "What do you mean by telling me I must listen to you for my own sake? If you come here to intimidate me, you come to the wrong man. My strength of character was universally noticed in our circle at Zurich—wasn't it, Lecount?"

"Universally, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "But let us hear Miss Garth. Perhaps I have misinterpreted her meaning?"

"On the contrary," replied Magdalen, "you have exactly expressed my meaning. My object in coming here is to warn Mr. Noel Vanstone against the course which he is now taking."

"Don't!" pleaded Mrs. Lecount. "Oh, if you want to help these poor gir's, don't talk in that way!"

Soften his resolution, ma'am, by entreaties; don't strengthen it by threats!" She a little overstrained the tone of humility in which she spoke those words—a little overacted the look of apprehension which accompanied them. If Magdalen had not seen plainly enough already that it was Mrs. Lecount's habitual practice to decide everything for her master in the first instance, and then to persuade him that he was not acting under his housekeeper's resolution, but under his own—she would have seen it now.

"You hear what Lecount has just said?" remarked Noel Vanstone. "You hear the unsolicited testimony of a person who has known me from childhood? Take care, Miss Garth — take care!" He complacently arranged the tails of his white dressing-gown over his knees, and took the plate of strawberries back on his lap.

"I have no wish to offend you," said Magdalen. "I am only anxious to open your eyes to the truth. You are not acquainted with the characters of the two sisters whose fortunes have fallen into your possession. I have known them from childhood; and I come to give you the benefit of my experience in their interests and in yours. You have nothing to dread from the elder of the two; she patiently accepts the hard lot which you, and your father before you, have forced on her. The younger sister's conduct is the very opposite of this. She has already declined to submit to your father's decision; and she now refuses to be silenced by Mrs. Lecount's letter. Take my word for it, she is

capable of giving you serious trouble if you persist in making an enemy of her."

Noel Vanstone changed colour once more, and began to fidget again in his chair. "Serious trouble," he repeated, with a blank look. "If you mean writing letters, ma'am, she has given trouble enough already. She has written once to me, and twice to my father. One of the letters to my father was a threatening letter—wasn't it, Lecount?"

"She expressed her feelings, poor child," said Mrs. Lecount. "I thought it hard to send her back her letter, but your dear father knew best. What I said at the time was, Why not let her express her feelings? What are a few threatening words, after all? In her position, poor creature, they are words, and nothing more."

"I advise you not to be too sure of that," said Magdalen. "I know her better than you do."

She paused at those words—paused in a momentary terror. The sting of Mrs. Lecount's pity had nearly irritated her into forgetting her assumed character, and speaking in her own voice.

"You have referred to the letters written by my pupil," she resumed, addressing Noel Vanstone, as soon as she felt sure of herself again. "We will say nothing about what she has written to your father; we will only speak of what she has written to you. Is there anything unbecoming in her letter, anything said in it that is false? Is it not true that these two sisters have been cruelly deprived of the provision which

their father made for them? His will to this day speaks for him and for them; and it only speaks to no purpose, because he was not aware that his marriage obliged him to make it again, and because he died before he could remedy the error. Can you deny that?"

Noel Vanstone smiled, and helped himself to a strawberry. "I don't attempt to deny it," he said. "Go on, Miss Garth."

"Is it not true," persisted Magdalen, "that the law which has taken the money from these sisters, whose father made no second will, has now given that very money to you, whose father made no will at all? Surely, explain it how you may, this is hard on those orphan girls?"

"Very hard," replied Noel Vanstone. "It strikes you in that light, too—doesn't it, Lecount?"

Mrs. Lecount shook her head, and closed her handsome black eyes. "Harrowing," she said; "I can characterize it, Miss Garth, by no other word—harrowing. How the young person—no! how Miss Vanstone the younger—discovered that my late respected master made no will, I am at a loss to understand. Perhaps it was put in the papers? But I am interrupting you, Miss Garth. You have something more to say about your pupil's letter?" She noiselessly drew her chair forward as she said those words, a few inches beyond the line of the visitor's chair. The attempt was neatly made, but it proved useless. Magdalen only kept her head more to the left—and the packing-case on the

floor prevented Mrs. Lecount from advancing any farther.

“I have only one more question to put,” said Magdalen. “My pupil’s letter addressed a proposal to Mr. Noel Vanstone. I beg him to inform me why he has refused to consider it.”

“My good lady!” cried Noel Vanstone, arching his white eyebrows in satirical astonishment. “Are you really in earnest? Do you know what the proposal is? Have you seen the letter?”

“I am quite in earnest,” said Magdalen, “and I have seen the letter. It entreats you to remember how Mr. Andrew Vanstone’s fortune has come into your hands; it informs you that one-half of that fortune, divided between his daughters, was what his will intended them to have; and it asks of your sense of justice to do for his children, what he would have done for them himself if he had lived. In plainer words still, it asks you to give one half of the money to the daughters, and it leaves you free to keep the other half yourself. That is the proposal. Why have you refused to consider it?”

“For the simplest possible reason, Miss Garth,” said Noel Vanstone, in high good humour. “Allow me to remind you of a well-known proverb: A fool and his money are soon parted. Whatever else I may be, ma’am, I’m not a fool.”

“Don’t put it in that way, sir!” remonstrated Mrs. Lecount. “Be serious—pray be serious!”

“Quite impossible, Lecount,” rejoined her master.

“I can’t be serious. My poor father, Miss Garth, took a high moral point of view in this matter. Lecount, there, takes a high moral point of view—don’t you, Lecount? I do nothing of the sort. I have lived too long in the continental atmosphere to trouble myself about moral points of view. My course in this business is as plain as two and two make four. I have got the money, and I should be a born idiot if I parted with it. There is my point of view! Simple enough, isn’t it? I don’t stand on my dignity; I don’t meet you with the law, which is all on my side; I don’t blame your coming here, as a total stranger, to try and alter my resolution; I don’t blame the two girls for wanting to dip their fingers into my purse. All I say is, I am not fool enough to open it. *Pas si bête*, as we used to say in the English circle at Zurich. You understand French, Miss Garth? *Pas si bête!*” He set aside his plate of strawberries once more, and daintily dried his fingers on his fine white napkin.

Magdalen kept her temper. If she could have struck him dead by lifting her hand at that moment—it is probable she would have lifted it. But she kept her temper.

“Am I to understand,” she asked, “that the last words you have to say in this matter, are the words said for you in Mrs. Lecount’s letter?”

“Precisely so,” replied Noel Vanstone.

“You have inherited your own father’s fortune, as well as the fortune of Mr. Andrew Vanstone, and yet you feel no obligation to act from motives of justice or generosity towards these two sisters? All you think it

necessary to say to them is—you have got the money, and you refuse to part with a single farthing of it?”

“Most accurately stated! Miss Garth, you are a woman of business. Lecount, Miss Garth is a woman of business.”

“Don’t appeal to me, sir!” cried Mrs. Lecount, gracefully wringing her plump white hands. “I can’t bear it! I must interfere! Let me suggest—oh, what do you call it in English?—a compromise. Dear Mr. Noel, you are perversely refusing to do yourself justice; you have better reasons than the reason you have given to Miss Garth. You follow your honoured father’s example; you feel it due to his memory to act in this matter as he acted before you. That is his reason, Miss Garth—I implore you on my knees, take that as his reason. He will do what his dear father did; no more, no less. His dear father made a proposal, and he himself will now make that proposal over again. Yes, Mr. Noel, you will remember what this poor girl says in her letter to you. Her sister has been obliged to go out as a governess; and she herself, in losing her fortune, has lost the hope of her marriage for years and years to come. You will remember this—and you will give the hundred pounds to one, and the hundred pounds to the other, which your admirable father offered in the past time? If he does this, Miss Garth, will he do enough? If he gives a hundred pounds each to these unfortunate sisters——?”

“He will repent the insult to the last hour of his life,” said Magdalen.

The instant that answer passed her lips, she would have given worlds to recall it. Mrs. Lecount had planted her sting in the right place at last. Those rash words of Magdalen's had burst from her passionately, in her own voice.

Nothing but the habit of public performance saved her from making the serious error that she had committed more palpable still, by attempting to set it right. Here, her past practice in the Entertainment came to her rescue, and urged her to go on instantly, in Miss Garth's voice, as if nothing had happened.

"You mean well, Mrs. Lecount," she continued, "but you are doing harm instead of good. My pupils will accept no such compromise as you propose. I am sorry to have spoken violently, just now; I beg you will excuse me." She looked hard for information in the housekeeper's face while she spoke those conciliatory words. Mrs. Lecount baffled the look, by putting her handkerchief to her eyes. Had she, or had she not, noticed the momentary change in Magdalen's voice from the tones that were assumed to the tones that were natural? Impossible to say.

"What more can I do!" murmured Mrs. Lecount behind her handkerchief. "Give me time to think—give me time to recover myself. May I retire, sir, for a moment? My nerves are shaken by this sad scene. I must have a glass of water, or I think I shall faint. Don't go yet, Miss Garth. I beg you will give us time to set this sad matter right, if we can—I beg you will remain until I come back."

There were two doors of entrance to the room. One, the door into the front parlour, close at Magdalen's left hand. The other, the door into the back parlour, situated behind her. Mrs. Lecount politely retired—through the open folding-doors—by this latter means of exit, so as not to disturb the visitor by passing in front of her. Magdalen waited until she heard the door open and close again behind her; and then resolved to make the most of the opportunity which left her alone with Noel Vanstone. The utter hopelessness of rousing a generous impulse in that base nature, had now been proved by her own experience. The last chance left was to treat him like the craven creature he was, and to influence him through his fears.

Before she could speak, Noel Vanstone himself broke the silence. Cunningly as he strove to hide it, he was half angry, half alarmed at his housekeeper's desertion of him. He looked doubtingly at his visitor; he showed a nervous anxiety to conciliate her, until Mrs. Lecount's return.

“Pray remember, ma'am, I never denied that this case was a hard one,” he began. “You said just now you had no wish to offend me—and I'm sure I don't want to offend you. May I offer you some strawberries? Would you like to look at my father's bargains? I assure you, ma'am, I am naturally a gallant man; and I feel for both these sisters—especially the younger one. Touch me on the subject of the tender passion, and you touch me on a weak place. Nothing would please me more than to hear that Miss Vanstone's

lover (I'm sure I always call her Miss Vanstone, and so does Lecount)—I say, ma'am, nothing would please me more than to hear that Miss Vanstone's lover had come back, and married her. If a loan of money would be likely to bring him back, and if the security offered was good, and if my lawyer thought me justified——”

“Stop, Mr. Vanstone,” said Magdalen. “You are entirely mistaken in your estimate of the person you have to deal with. You are seriously wrong in supposing that the marriage of the younger sister—if she could be married in a week's time—would make any difference in the convictions which induced her to write to your father and to you. I don't deny that she may act from a mixture of motives. I don't deny that she clings to the hope of hastening her marriage, and to the hope of rescuing her sister from a life of dependence. But, if both those objects were accomplished by other means, nothing would induce her to leave you in possession of the inheritance which her father meant his children to have. I know her, Mr. Vanstone! She is a nameless, homeless, friendless wretch. The law which takes care of you, the law which takes care of all legitimate children, casts her like carrion to the winds. It is your law—not hers. She only knows it as the instrument of a vile oppression, an insufferable wrong. The sense of that wrong haunts her, like a possession of the devil. The resolution to right that wrong burns in her like fire. If that miserable girl was married and rich with millions to-morrow, do you

think she would move an inch from her purpose? I tell you she would resist, to the last breath in her body, the vile injustice which has struck at the helpless children, through the calamity of their father's death! I tell you she would shrink from no means which a desperate woman can employ, to force that closed hand of yours open, or die in the attempt!"

She stopped abruptly. Once more, her own indomitable earnestness had betrayed her. Once more the inborn nobility of that perverted nature had risen superior to the deception which it had stooped to practise. The scheme of the moment vanished from her mind's view; and the resolution of her life burst its way outward in her own words, in her own tones, pouring hotly and more hotly from her heart. She saw the abject mannikin before her, cowering silent in his chair. Had his fears left him sense enough to perceive the change in her voice? No: *his* face spoke the truth—his fears had bewildered him. This time, the chance of the moment had befriended her. The door behind her chair had not opened again yet. "No ears but his have heard me," she thought, with a sense of unutterable relief. "I have escaped Mrs. Lecount."

She had done nothing of the kind. Mrs. Lecount had never left the room.

After opening the door and closing it again, without going out, the housekeeper had noiselessly knelt down behind Magdalen's chair. Steadying herself against the post of the folding door, she took a pair of scissors from her pocket, waited until Noel Vanstone (from

whose view she was entirely hidden) had attracted Magdalen's attention by speaking to her; and then bent forward with the scissors ready in her hand. The skirt of the false Miss Garth's gown—the brown alpaca dress, with the white spots on it—touched the floor, within the housekeeper's reach. Mrs. Lecount lifted the outer of the two flounces which ran round the bottom of the dress, one over the other; softly cut away a little irregular fragment of stuff, from the inner flounce; and neatly smoothed the outer one over it again, so as to hide the gap. By the time she had put the scissors back in her pocket, and had risen to her feet (sheltering herself behind the post of the folding door), Magdalen had spoken her last words. Mrs. Lecount quietly repeated the ceremony of opening and shutting the back parlour door; and returned to her place.

“What has happened, sir, in my absence?” she inquired, addressing her master with a look of alarm. “You are pale; you are agitated! Oh, Miss Garth, have you forgotten the caution I gave you in the other room?”

“Miss Garth has forgotten everything,” cried Noel Vanstone, recovering his lost composure on the reappearance of Mrs. Lecount. “Miss Garth has threatened me in the most outrageous manner. I forbid you to pity either of those two girls any more, Lecount—especially the younger one. She is the most desperate wretch I ever heard of! If she can't get my money by fair means, she threatens to have it by foul.

Miss Garth has told me that to my face. To my face!" he repeated, folding his arms and looking mortally insulted.

"Compose yourself, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "Pray compose yourself, and leave me to speak to Miss Garth.—I regret to hear, ma'am, that you have forgotten what I said to you in the next room. You have agitated Mr. Noel; you have compromised the interests you came here to plead; and you have only repeated what we knew before. The language you have allowed yourself to use in my absence, is the same language which your pupil was foolish enough to employ when she wrote for the second time, to my late master. How can a lady of your years and experience seriously repeat such nonsense? This girl boasts and threatens. She will do this; she will do that. You have her confidence, ma'am. Tell me, if you please, in plain words, what can she do?"

Sharply as the taunt was pointed, it glanced off harmless. Mrs. Lecount had planted her sting once too often. Magdalen rose, in complete possession of her assumed character, and composedly terminated the interview. Ignorant as she was of what had happened behind her chair, she saw a change in Mrs. Lecount's look and manner, which warned her to run no more risks, and to trust herself no longer in the house.

"I am not in my pupil's confidence," she said. "Her own acts will answer your question when the time comes. I can only tell you, from my own knowledge of her, that she is no boaster. What she wrote

to Mr. Michael Vanstone, was what she was prepared to do—what, I have reason to think, she was actually on the point of doing, when her plans were overthrown by his death. Mr. Michael Vanstone's son has only to persist in following his father's course to find, before long, that I am not mistaken in my pupil, and that I have not come here to intimidate him by empty threats. My errand is done. I leave Mr. Noel Vanstone with two alternatives to choose from. I leave him to share Mr. Andrew Vanstone's fortune with Mr. Andrew Vanstone's daughters—or to persist in his present refusal and face the consequences." She bowed, and walked to the door.

Noel Vanstone started to his feet, with anger and alarm struggling which should express itself first in his blank white face. Before he could open his lips, Mrs. Lecount's plump hands descended on his shoulders; put him softly back in his chair; and restored the plate of strawberries to its former position on his lap.

"Refresh yourself, Mr. Noel, with a few more strawberries," she said; "and leave Miss Garth to me."

She followed Magdalen into the passage, and closed the door of the room after her.

"Are you residing in London, ma'am?" asked Mrs. Lecount.

"No," replied Magdalen. "I reside in the country."

"If I want to write to you, where can I address my letter?"

"To the post-office, Birmingham," said Magdalen,

mentioning the place which she had last left, and at which all letters were still addressed to her.

Mrs. Lecount repeated the direction to fix it in her memory—advanced two steps in the passage—and quietly laid her right hand on Magdalen's arm.

“A word of advice, ma'am,” she said; “one word at parting. You are a bold woman and a clever woman. Don't be too bold; don't be too clever. You are risking more than you think for.” She suddenly raised herself on tiptoe, and whispered the next words in Magdalen's ear. “*I hold you in the hollow of my hand!*” said Mrs. Lecount, with a fierce hissing emphasis on every syllable. Her left hand clenched itself stealthily, as she spoke. It was the hand in which she had concealed the fragment of stuff from Magdalen's gown—the hand which held it fast at that moment.

“What do you mean?” asked Magdalen, pushing her back.

Mrs. Lecount glided away politely to open the house-door.

“I mean nothing now,” she said; “wait a little, and time may show. One last question, ma'am, before I bid you good-bye. When your pupil was a little innocent child, did she ever amuse herself by building a house of cards?”

Magdalen impatiently answered by a gesture in the affirmative.

“Did you ever see her build up the house higher and higher,” proceeded Mrs. Lecount, “till it was

quite a pagoda of cards? Did you ever see her open her little child's eyes wide, and look at it, and feel so proud of what she had done already, that she wanted to do more? Did you ever see her steady her pretty little hand, and hold her innocent breath, and put one other card on the top—and lay the whole house, the instant afterwards, a heap of ruins on the table? Ah, you have seen that. Give her, if you please, a friendly message from me. I venture to say she has built the house high enough already; and I recommend her to be careful before she puts on that other card."

"She shall have your message," said Magdalen, with Miss Garth's bluntness, and Miss Garth's emphatic nod of the head. "But I doubt her minding it. Her hand is rather steadier than you suppose; and I think she will put on the other card."

"And bring the house down," said Mrs. Lecount.

"And build it up again," rejoined Magdalen. "I wish you good morning."

"Good morning," said Mrs. Lecount, opening the door. "One last word, Miss Garth. Do think of what I said in the back room! Do try the Golden Ointment for that sad affliction in your eyes!"

As Magdalen crossed the threshold of the door, she was met by the postman, ascending the house steps, with a letter picked out from the bundle in his hand. "Noel Vanstone, Esquire?" she heard the man say interrogatively, as she made her way down the front garden to the street.

She passed through the garden gate, little thinking

from what new difficulty and new danger her timely departure had saved her. The letter which the postman had just delivered into the housekeeper's hands, was no other than the anonymous letter addressed to Noel Vanstone by Captain Wragge.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. LECOUNT returned to the parlour, with the fragment of Magdalen's dress in one hand, and with Captain Wragge's letter in the other.

"Have you got rid of her?" asked Noel Vanstone. "Have you shut the door at last on Miss Garth?"

"Don't call her Miss Garth, sir," said Mrs. Lecount, smiling contemptuously. "She is as much Miss Garth as you are. We have been favoured by the performance of a clever masquerade; and if we had taken the disguise off our visitor, I think we should have found under it, Miss Vanstone herself.—Here is a letter for you, sir, which the postman has just left."

She put the letter on the table within her master's reach. Noel Vanstone's amazement at the discovery just communicated to him, kept his whole attention concentrated on the housekeeper's face. He never so much as looked at the letter when she placed it before him.

"Take my word for it, sir," proceeded Mrs. Lecount, composedly taking a chair. "When our visitor gets home, she will put her grey hair away in a box, and will cure that sad affliction in her eyes with warm water and a sponge. If she had painted the marks on

her face, as well as she painted the inflammation in her eyes, the light would have shown me nothing, and I should certainly have been deceived. But I saw the marks; I saw a young woman's skin under that dirty complexion of hers; I heard, in this room, a true voice in a passion, as well as a false voice talking with an accent,—and I don't believe in one morsel of that lady's personal appearance from top to toe. The girl herself in my opinion, Mr. Noel—and a bold girl too.”

“Why didn't you lock the door and send for the police?” asked Mr. Noel. “My father would have sent for the police. You know, as well I do, Lecount, my father would have sent for the police.”

“Pardon me, sir,” said Mrs. Lecount, “I think your father would have waited until he had got something more for the police to do than we have got for them yet. We shall see this lady again, sir. Perhaps, she will come here next time, with her own face and her own voice. I am curious to see what her own face is like. I am curious to know whether what I have heard of her voice in a passion, is enough to make me recognize her voice when she is calm. I possess a little memorial of her visit of which she is not aware; and she will not escape me so easily as she thinks. If it turns out a useful memorial, you shall know what it is. If not, I will abstain from troubling you on so trifling a subject.—Allow me to remind you, sir, of the letter under your hand. You have not looked at it yet.”

Noel Vanstone opened the letter. He started as his eye fell on the first lines—hesitated—and then hurriedly read it through. The paper dropped from his hand, and he sank back in his chair. Mrs. Lecount sprang to her feet with the alacrity of a young woman, and picked up the letter.

“What has happened, sir?” she asked. Her face altered as she put the question; and her large black eyes hardened fiercely, in genuine astonishment and alarm.

“Send for the police,” exclaimed her master. “Lecount, I insist on being protected. Send for the police!”

“May I read the letter, sir?”

He feebly waved his hand. Mrs. Lecount read the letter attentively, and put it aside, on the table, without a word, when she had done.

“Have you nothing to say to me?” asked Noel Vanstone, staring at his housekeeper in blank dismay. “Lecount, I’m to be robbed! The scoundrel who wrote that letter knows all about it, and won’t tell me anything unless I pay him. I’m to be robbed! Here’s property on this table worth thousands of pounds—property that can never be replaced—property that all the crowned heads in Europe could not produce if they tried. Lock me in, Lecount—and send for the police!”

Instead of sending for the police, Mrs. Lecount took a large green-paper fan from the chimney-piece, and seated herself opposite her master.

“You are agitated, Mr. Noel,” she said, “you are heated. Let me cool you.”

With her face as hard as ever—with less tenderness of look and manner than most women would have shown if they had been rescuing a half-drowned fly from a milk-jug—she silently and patiently fanned him for five minutes or more. No practised eye observing the peculiar bluish pallor of his complexion, and the marked difficulty with which he drew his breath, could have failed to perceive that the great organ of life was, in this man, what the housekeeper had stated it to be, too weak for the function which it was called on to perform. The heart laboured over its work, as if it had been the heart of a worn-out old man.

“Are you relieved, sir?” asked Mrs. Lecount. “Can you think a little? Can you exercise your better judgment?”

She rose and put her hand over his heart, with as much mechanical attention and as little genuine interest, as if she had been feeling the plates at dinner to ascertain if they had been properly warmed. “Yes,” she went on, seating herself again, and resuming the exercise of the fan; “you are getting better already, Mr. Noel.—Don’t ask me about this anonymous letter, until you have thought for yourself, and have given your own opinion first.” She went on with the fanning, and looked him hard in the face all the time. “Think,” she said; “think, sir, without troubling yourself to express your thoughts. Trust to my intimate sympathy with you to read them. Yes, Mr. Noel, this letter is a paltry

attempt to frighten you. What does it say? It says you are the object of a conspiracy, directed by Miss Vanstone. We know that already—the lady of the inflamed eyes has told us. We snap our fingers at the conspiracy. What does the letter say next? It says the writer has valuable information to give you if you will pay for it. What did you call this person yourself, just now, sir?”

“I called him a scoundrel,” said Noel Vanstone, recovering his self-importance, and raising himself gradually in his chair.

“I agree with you in that, sir, as I agree in everything else,” proceeded Mrs. Lecount. “He is a scoundrel who really has this information, and who means what he says—or, he is a mouthpiece of Miss Vanstone’s; and she has caused this letter to be written for the purpose of puzzling us by another form of disguise. Whether the letter is true, or whether the letter is false—am I not reading your own wiser thoughts, now, Mr. Noel?—you know better than to put your enemies on their guard by employing the police in this matter, too soon. I quite agree with you—no police just yet. You will allow this anonymous man or anonymous woman, to suppose you are easily frightened; you will lay a trap for the information in return for the trap laid for your money; you will answer the letter and see what comes of the answer; and you will only pay the expense of employing the police, when you know the expense is necessary. I agree with you again—no expense, if we can help it.

In every particular, Mr. Noel, my mind and your mind in this matter, are one."

"It strikes you in that light, Lecount—does it?" said Noel Vanstone. "I think so, myself; I certainly think so. I won't pay the police a farthing if I can possibly help it." He took up the letter again, and became fretfully perplexed over a second reading of it. "But the man wants money!" he broke out, impatiently. "You seem to forget, Lecount, that the man wants money."

"Money which you offer him, sir," rejoined Mrs. Lecount; "but—as your thoughts have already anticipated—money which you don't give him. No! no! you say to this man, 'Hold out your hand, sir;' and, when he has held it, you give him a smack for his pains, and put your own hand back in your pocket.—I am so glad to see you laughing, Mr. Noel! so glad to see you getting back your good spirits. We will answer the letter by advertisement, as the writer directs—advertisement is so cheap! Your poor hand is trembling a little—shall I hold the pen for you? I am not fit to do more; but I can always promise to hold the pen."

Without waiting for his reply, she went into the back parlour, and returned with pen, ink, and paper. Arranging a blotting-book on her knees, and looking a model of cheerful submission, she placed herself once more in front of her master's chair.

"Shall I write from your dictation, sir?" she inquired. "Or, shall I make a little sketch, and will you correct it afterwards? I will make a little sketch. Let

me see the letter. We are to advertise in the Times, and we are to address, 'An Unknown Friend.' What shall I say, Mr. Noel? Stay; I will write it, and then you can see for yourself: 'An Unknown Friend is requested to mention (by advertisement) an address at which a letter can reach him. The receipt of the information which he offers will be acknowledged by a reward of——' What sum of money do you wish me to set down, sir?"

"Set down nothing," said Noel Vanstone, with a sudden outbreak of impatience. "Money-matters are my business—I say money-matters are *my* business, Lecount. Leave it to me."

"Certainly, sir," replied Mrs. Lecount, handing her master the blotting-book. "You will not forget to be liberal in offering money, when you know beforehand you don't mean to part with it?"

"Don't dictate, Lecount! I won't submit to dictation!" said Noel Vanstone, asserting his own independence more and more impatiently. "I mean to conduct this business for myself. I am master, Lecount!"

"You are master, sir."

"My father was master before me. And I am my father's son. I tell you, Lecount, I am my father's son!"

Mrs. Lecount bowed submissively.

"I mean to set down any sum of money I think right," pursued Noel Vanstone, nodding his little flaxen head vehemently. "I mean to send this advertisement myself. The servant shall take it to the stationer's to be put into the Times. When I ring the bell twice,

send the servant. You understand, Lecount? Send the servant."

Mrs. Lecount bowed again and walked slowly to the door. She knew to a nicety when to lead her master, and when to let him go alone. Experience had taught her to govern him in all essential points, by giving way to him afterwards on all points of minor detail. It was a characteristic of his weak nature—as it is of all weak natures—to assert itself obstinately on trifles. The filling in of the blank in the advertisement, was the trifle in this case; and Mrs. Lecount quieted her master's suspicions that she was leading him, by instantly conceding it. "My mule has kicked," she thought to herself, in her own language, as she opened the door. "I can do no more with him to-day."

"Lecount!" cried her master, as she stepped into the passage. "Come back."

Mrs. Lecount came back.

"You're not offended with me, are you?" asked Noel Vanstone, uneasily.

"Certainly not, sir," replied Mrs. Lecount. "As you said just now—you are master."

"Good creature! Give me your hand." He kissed her hand, and smiled in high approval of his own affectionate proceeding. "Lecount, you are a worthy creature!"

"Thank you, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. She curtseyed and went out. "If he had any brains in that monkey-head of his," she said to herself in the passage, "what a rascal he would be!"

Left by himself, Noel Vanstone became absorbed in anxious reflection over the blank space in the advertisement. Mrs. Lecount's apparently superfluous hint to him, to be liberal in offering money when he knew he had no intention of parting with it, had been founded on an intimate knowledge of his character. He had inherited his father's sordid love of money, without inheriting his father's hard-headed capacity for seeing the uses to which money can be put. His one idea in connection with his wealth, was the idea of keeping it. He was such an inborn miser, that the bare prospect of being liberal in theory only, daunted him. He took up the pen; laid it down again; and read the anonymous letter for the third time, shaking his head over it suspiciously. "If I offer this man a large sum of money," he thought, on a sudden; "how do I know he may not find a means of actually making me pay it? Women are always in a hurry. Lecount is always in a hurry. I have got the afternoon before me—I'll take the afternoon to consider it."

He fretfully put away the blotting-book, and the sketch of the advertisement, on the chair which Mrs. Lecount had just left. As he returned to his own seat, he shook his little head solemnly, and arranged his white dressing-gown over his knees, with the air of a man absorbed in anxious thought. Minute after minute passed away; the quarters and the half-hours succeeded each other on the dial of Mrs. Lecount's watch—and still Noel Vanstone remained lost in

doubt ; still no summons for the servant disturbed the tranquillity of the parlour bell.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, after parting with Mrs. Lecount, Magdalen had cautiously abstained from crossing the road to her lodgings, and had only ventured to return after making a circuit in the neighbourhood. When she found herself once more in Vauxhall Walk, the first object which attracted her attention, was a cab drawn up before the door of the lodgings. A few steps more in advance showed her the landlady's daughter, standing at the cab-door, engaged in a dispute with the driver on the subject of his fare. Noticing that the girl's back was turned towards her, Magdalen instantly profited by that circumstance, and slipped unobserved into the house.

She glided along the passage ; ascended the stairs ; and found herself, on the first landing, face to face with her travelling companion ! There stood Mrs. Wragge, with a pile of small parcels hugged up in her arms, anxiously waiting the issue of the dispute with the cabman in the street. To return was impossible—the sound of the angry voices below, was advancing into the passage. To hesitate was worse than useless. But one choice was left—the choice of going on—and Magdalen desperately took it. She pushed by Mrs. Wragge, without a word ; ran into her own room ; tore off her cloak, bonnet, and wig ; and threw them down out of sight, in the blank space between the sofa-bedstead and the wall.

For the first few moments, astonishment bereft Mrs. Wragge of the power of speech and rooted her to the spot where she stood. Two out of the collection of parcels in her arms fell from them on the stairs. The sight of that catastrophe roused her. "Thieves!" cried Mrs. Wragge, suddenly struck by an idea. "Thieves!"

Magdalen heard her through the room door, which she had not had time to close completely. "Is that you, Mrs. Wragge?" she called out in her own voice. "What is the matter?" She snatched up a towel while she spoke; dipped it in water; and passed it rapidly over the lower part of her face. At the sound of the familiar voice, Mrs. Wragge turned round—dropped a third parcel—and, forgetting it in her astonishment, ascended the second flight of stairs. Magdalen stepped out on the first-floor landing, with the towel held over her forehead as if she was suffering from headache. Her false eyebrows required time for their removal, and a headache assumed for the occasion, suggested the most convenient pretext she could devise for hiding them as they were hidden now.

"What are you disturbing the house for?" she asked. "Pray be quiet. I am half blind with the headache."

"Anything wrong, ma'am?" inquired the landlady, from the passage.

"Nothing whatever," replied Magdalen. "My friend is timid; and the dispute with the cabman has frightened her. Pay the man what he wants, and let him go."

“Where is She?” asked Mrs. Wragge, in a tremulous whisper. “Where’s the woman who scuttled by me into your room?”

“Pooh!” said Magdalen. “No woman scuttled by you—as you call it. Look in and see for yourself.”

She threw open the door. Mrs. Wragge walked into the room—looked all over it—saw nobody—and indicated her astonishment at the result, by dropping a fourth parcel, and trembling helplessly from head to foot.

“I saw her go in here,” said Mrs. Wragge, in awe-struck accents. “A woman in a grey cloak and a poke bonnet. A rude woman. She scuttled by me, on the stairs—she did. Here’s the room, and no woman in it. Give us a Prayer-Book!” cried Mrs. Wragge, turning deadly pale, and letting her whole remaining collection of parcels fall about her in a little cascade of commodities. “I want to read something Good. I want to think of my latter end. I’ve seen a Ghost!”

“Nonsense!” said Magdalen. “You’re dreaming; the shopping has been too much for you. Go into your own room, and take your bonnet off.”

“I’ve heard tell of ghosts in nightgowns; ghosts in sheets; and ghosts in chains,” proceeded Mrs. Wragge, standing petrified in her own magic circle of linen-draper’s parcels. “Here’s a worse ghost than any of ’em—a ghost in a grey cloak and a poke bonnet. I know what it is,” continued Mrs. Wragge, melting into penitent tears. “It’s a judgment on me for being so

happy away from the captain. It's a judgment on me for having been down at heel in half the shops in London, first with one shoe and then with the other, all the time I've been out. I'm a sinful creature. Don't let go of me—whatever you do, my dear, don't let go of me!" She caught Magdalen fast by the arm, and fell into another trembling fit at the bare idea of being left by herself.

The one remaining chance, in such an emergency as this, was to submit to circumstances. Magdalen took Mrs. Wragge to a chair; having first placed it in such a position as might enable her to turn her back on her travelling-companion, while she removed the false eyebrows by the help of a little water. "Wait a minute there," she said; "and try if you can compose yourself, while I bathe my head."

"Compose myself?" repeated Mrs. Wragge. "How am I to compose myself when my head feels off my shoulders? The worst Buzzing I ever had with the Cookery-book, was nothing to the Buzzing I've got now with the Ghost. Here's a miserable end to a holiday! You may take me back again, my dear, whenever you like—I've had enough of it already!"

Having at last succeeded in removing the eyebrows, Magdalen was free to combat the unfortunate impression produced on her companion's mind, by every weapon of persuasion which her ingenuity could employ.

The attempt proved useless. Mrs. Wragge persisted—on evidence which, it may be remarked in parenthesis,

would have satisfied many wiser ghost-seers than herself—in believing that she had been supernaturally favoured by a visitor from the world of spirits. All that Magdalen could do was to ascertain by cautious investigation, that Mrs. Wragge had not been quick enough to identify the supposed ghost with the character of the old north-country lady in the Entertainment. Having satisfied herself on this point, she had no resource but to leave the rest to the natural incapability of retaining impressions—unless those impressions were perpetually renewed—which was one of the characteristic infirmities of her companion's weak mind. After fortifying Mrs. Wragge by reiterated assurances that one appearance (according to all the laws and regulations of ghosts) meant nothing, unless it was immediately followed by two more—after patiently leading back her attention to the parcels dropped on the floor, and on the stairs—and after promising to keep the door of communication ajar between the two rooms, if Mrs. Wragge would engage on her side to retire to her own chamber, and to say no more on the terrible subject of the ghost—Magdalen at last secured the privilege of reflecting uninterruptedly on the events of that memorable day.

Two serious consequences had followed her first step forward. Mrs. Lecount had entrapped her into speaking in her own voice; and accident had confronted her with Mrs. Wragge, in disguise.

What advantage had she gained to set against these disasters? The advantage of knowing more of Noel Vanstone and of Mrs. Lecount, than she might have

discovered in months, if she had trusted to inquiries made for her by others. One uncertainty which had hitherto perplexed her, was set at rest already. The scheme she had privately devised against Michael Vanstone—which Captain Wragge's sharp insight had partially penetrated, when she first warned him that their partnership must be dissolved—was a scheme which she could now plainly see must be abandoned as hopeless, in the case of Michael Vanstone's son. The father's habits of speculation had been the pivot on which the whole machinery of her meditated conspiracy had been constructed to turn. No such vantage-ground was discoverable in the doubly sordid character of the son. Noel Vanstone was invulnerable on the very point which had presented itself in his father as open to attack.

Having reached this conclusion, how was she to shape her future course? What new means could she discover, which would lead her secretly to her end, in defiance of Mrs. Lecount's malicious vigilance, and Noel Vanstone's miserly distrust?

She was seated before the looking-glass, mechanically combing out her hair, while that all-important consideration occupied her mind. The agitation of the moment had raised a feverish colour in her cheeks, and had brightened the light in her large grey eyes. She was conscious of looking her best; conscious how her beauty gained by contrast, after the removal of the disguise. Her lovely light brown hair, looked thicker and softer than ever, now that it had escaped from its

imprisonment under the grey wig. She twisted it this way and that, with quick dexterous fingers ; she laid it in masses on her shoulders ; she threw it back from them in a heap, and turned sideways to see how it fell—to see her back and shoulders, freed from the artificial deformities of the padded cloak. After a moment, she faced the looking-glass once more ; plunged both hands deep in her hair ; and, resting her elbows on the table, looked closer and closer at the reflection of herself, until her breath began to dim the glass. “ I can twist any man alive round my finger,” she thought, with a smile of superb triumph, “ as long as I keep my looks ! If that contemptible wretch saw me now——” She shrank from following the thought to its end, with a sudden horror of herself : she drew back from the glass, shuddering, and put her hands over her face. “ Oh Frank !” she murmured, “ but for you, what a wretch I might be !” Her eager fingers snatched the little white silk bag from its hiding-place in her bosom ; her lips devoured it with silent kisses. “ My darling ! my angel ! Oh, Frank, how I love you !” The tears gushed into her eyes. She passionately dried them, restored the bag to its place, and turned her back on the looking-glass. “ No more of myself,” she thought ; “ no more of my mad, miserable self for to-day !”

Shrinking from all further contemplation of her next step in advance—shrinking from the fast darkening future, with which Noel Vanstone was now associated in her inmost thoughts—she looked impatiently about the room for some homely occupation which

might take her out of herself. The disguise which she had flung down between the wall and the bed recurred to her memory. It was impossible to leave it there. Mrs. Wragge (now occupied in sorting her parcels) might weary of her employment, might come in again at a moment's notice, might pass near the bed and see the grey cloak. What was to be done?

Her first thought was to put the disguise back in her trunk. But, after what had happened, there was danger in trusting it so near to herself, while she and Mrs. Wragge were together under the same roof. She resolved to be rid of it that evening, and boldly determined on sending it back to Birmingham. Her bonnet-box fitted into her trunk. She took the box out, thrust in the wig and cloak; and remorselessly flattened down the bonnet at the top. The gown (which she had not yet taken off) was her own; Mrs. Wragge had been accustomed to see her in it—there was no need to send the gown back. Before closing the box, she hastily traced these lines on a sheet of paper: "I took the enclosed things away by mistake. Please keep them for me with the rest of my luggage in your possession, until you hear from me again." Putting the paper on the top of the bonnet, she directed the box to Captain Wragge, at Birmingham; took it down stairs immediately; and sent the landlady's daughter away with it to the nearest Receiving House. "That difficulty is disposed of," she thought, as she went back to her own room again.

Mrs. Wragge was still occupied in sorting her parcels,

on her narrow little bed. She turned round with a faint scream, when Magdalen looked in at her. "I thought it was the ghost again," said Mrs. Wragge. "I'm trying to take warning, my dear, by what's happened to me. I've put all my parcels straight, just as the captain would like to see 'em. I'm up at heel with both shoes. If I close my eyes to-night—which I don't think I shall—I'll go to sleep as straight as my legs will let me. And I'll never have another holiday as long as I live. I hope I shall be forgiven," said Mrs. Wragge, mournfully shaking her head. "I humbly hope I shall be forgiven."

"Forgiven!" repeated Magdalen. "If other women wanted as little forgiving as you do——Well! well! Suppose you open some of these parcels. Come! I want to see what you have been buying to-day."

Mrs. Wragge hesitated, sighed penitently, considered a little, stretched out her hand timidly towards one of the parcels, thought of the supernatural warning, and shrank back from her own purchases with a desperate exertion of self-control.

"Open this one," said Magdalen to encourage her: "What is it?"

Mrs. Wragge's faded blue eyes began to brighten dimly, in spite of her remorse; but she self-denyingly shook her head. The master passion of shopping might claim his own again—but the ghost was not laid yet.

"Did you get it a bargain?" asked Magdalen confidentially.

“Dirt cheap!” cried poor Mrs. Wragge, falling headlong into the snare, and darting at the parcel as eagerly as if nothing had happened.

Magdalen kept her gossiping over her purchases, for an hour or more; and then wisely determined to distract her attention from all ghostly recollections, in another way, by taking her out for a walk.

As they left the lodgings, the door of Noel Vanstone’s house opened, and the woman-servant appeared, bent on another errand. She was apparently charged with a letter on this occasion, which she carried carefully in her hand. Conscious of having formed no plan yet, either for attack or defence, Magdalen wondered, with a momentary dread, whether Mrs. Lecount had decided already on opening fresh communications, and whether the letter was directed to “Miss Garth.”

The letter bore no such address. Noel Vanstone had solved his pecuniary problem at last. The blank space in the advertisement was filled up; and Mrs. Lecount’s acknowledgment of the captain’s anonymous warning, was now on its way to insertion in the Times.

THE END OF THE THIRD SCENE.

BETWEEN THE SCENES.



PROGRESS OF THE STORY THROUGH THE
POST.



BETWEEN THE SCENES.

I.

EXTRACT FROM THE ADVERTISING COLUMNS OF THE
TIMES:—

“AN UNKNOWN FRIEND is requested to mention (by advertisement) an address at which a letter can reach him. The receipt of the information which he offers, will be acknowledged by a reward of Five Pounds.”

II.

FROM CAPTAIN WRAGGE TO MAGDALEN.

“Birmingham, July 2nd, 1847.

“MY DEAR GIRL,

“The box containing the articles of costume which you took away by mistake, has come safely to hand. Consider it under my special protection, until I hear from you again.

“I embrace this opportunity to assure you, once more, of my unalterable fidelity to your interests.

Without attempting to intrude myself into your confidence, may I inquire whether Mr. Noel Vanstone has consented to do you justice? I greatly fear he has declined—in which case, I can lay my hand on my heart, and solemnly declare that his meanness revolts me. Why do I feel a foreboding that you have appealed to him in vain? Why do I find myself viewing this fellow in the light of a noxious insect? We are total strangers to each other; I have no sort of knowledge of him, except the knowledge I picked up in making your inquiries. Has my intense sympathy with your interests made my perceptions prophetic? or, to put it fancifully, is there really such a thing as a former state of existence? and has Mr. Noel Vanstone mortally insulted me—say, in some other planet?

“I write, my dear Magdalen, as you see, with my customary dash of humour. But I am serious in placing my services at your disposal. Don't let the question of terms cause you an instant's hesitation. I accept, beforehand, any terms you like to mention. If your present plans point that way—I am ready to squeeze Mr. Noel Vanstone, in your interests, till the gold oozes out of him at every pore. Pardon the coarseness of this metaphor. My anxiety to be of service to you rushes into words; lays my meaning, in the rough, at your feet; and leaves your taste to polish it with the choicest ornaments of the English language.

“How is my unfortunate wife? I am afraid you find it quite impossible to keep her up at heel, or to

mould her personal appearance into harmony with the eternal laws of symmetry and order. Does she attempt to be too familiar with you? I have always been accustomed to check her, in this respect. She has never been permitted to call me anything but Captain; and on the rare occasions, since our union, when circumstances may have obliged her to address me by letter, her opening form of salutation has been rigidly restricted to 'Dear Sir.' Accept these trifling domestic particulars as suggesting hints which may be useful to you in managing Mrs. Wragge; and believe me, in anxious expectation of hearing from you again,

"Devotedly yours,

"HORATIO WRAGGE."

III.

FROM NORAH TO MAGDALEN.

Forwarded, with the Two Letters that follow it, from the Post Office, Birmingham.

"Westmoreland House, Kensington,

"July 1st.

"MY DEAREST MAGDALEN,

"When you write next (and pray write soon!) address your letter to me at Miss Garth's. I have left my situation; and some little time may elapse before I find another.

"Now it is all over, I may acknowledge to you, my darling, that I was not happy. I tried hard to win

the affection of the two little girls I had to teach ; but they seemed, I am sure I can't tell why, to dislike me from the first. Their mother I have no reason to complain of. But their grandmother, who was really the ruling power in the house, made my life very hard to me. My inexperience in teaching was a constant subject of remark with her ; and my difficulties with the children were always visited on me as if they had been entirely of my own making. I tell you this, so that you may not suppose I regret having left my situation. Far from it, my love—I am glad to be out of the house.

“ I have saved a little money, Magdalen ; and I should so like to spend it in staying a few days with you. My heart aches for a sight of my sister ; my ears are weary for the sound of her voice. A word from you, telling me where we can meet, is all I want. Think of it—pray think of it.

“ Don't suppose I am discouraged by this first check. There are many kind people in the world ; and some of them may employ me next time. The way to happiness is often very hard to find ; harder, I almost think, for women than for men. But, if we only try patiently, and try long enough, we reach it at last—in Heaven, if not on earth. I think *my* way now, is the way which leads to seeing you again. Don't forget that, my love, the next time you think of

“NORAH.”

IV.

FROM MISS GARTH TO MAGDALEN.

“Westmoreland House, July 1st.

“MY DEAR MAGDALEN,

“You have no useless remonstrances to apprehend, at the sight of my handwriting. My only object in this letter is to tell you something, which I know your sister will not tell you of her own accord. She is entirely ignorant that I am writing to you. Keep her in ignorance, if you wish to spare her unnecessary anxiety—and me unnecessary distress.

“Norah’s letter, no doubt, tells you that she has left her situation. I feel it my painful duty to add, that she has left it on your account.

“The matter occurred in this manner. Messrs. Wyatt, Pendril, and Gwilt are the solicitors of the gentleman in whose family Norah was employed. The life which you have chosen for yourself was known, as long ago as December last, to all the partners. You were discovered performing in public at Derby by the person who had been employed to trace you at York; and that discovery was communicated by Mr. Wyatt to Norah’s employer, a few days since, in reply to direct inquiries about you on that gentleman’s part. His wife, and his mother (who lives with him) had expressly desired that he would make those inquiries; their doubts having been aroused by Norah’s evasive

answers when they questioned her about her sister. You know Norah too well to blame her for this. Evasion was the only escape your present life had left her from telling a downright falsehood.

“That same day, the two ladies of the family, the elder and the younger, sent for your sister; and told her they had discovered that you were a public performer, roaming from place to place in the country, under an assumed name. They were just enough not to blame Norah for this; they were just enough to acknowledge that her conduct had been as irreproachable, as I had guaranteed it should be when I got her the situation. But, at the same time, they made it a positive condition of her continuing in their employment, that she should never permit you to visit her at their house—or to meet her and walk out with her when she was in attendance on the children. Your sister—who has patiently born all hardships that fell on herself—instantly resented the slur cast on *you*. She gave her employers warning on the spot. High words followed; and she left the house that evening.

“I have no wish to distress you by representing the loss of this situation in the light of a disaster. Norah was not so happy in it, as I had hoped and believed she would be. It was impossible for me to know beforehand, that the children were sullen and intractable—or that the husband’s mother was accustomed to make her domineering disposition felt by every one in the house. I will readily admit that Norah is well out of this situation. But the harm does not stop here.

For all you and I know to the contrary, the harm may go on. What has happened in this situation, may happen in another. Your way of life, however pure your conduct may be—and I will do you the justice to believe it pure—is a suspicious way of life to all respectable people. I have lived long enough in this world to know, that the Sense of Propriety, in nine Englishwomen out of ten, makes no allowances and feels no pity. Norah's next employers may discover you; and Norah may throw up a situation next time, which we may never be able to find for her again.

“I leave you to consider this. My child! don't think I am hard on you. I am jealous for your sister's tranquillity. If you will forget the past, Magdalen, and come back—trust to your old governess to forget it too, and to give you the home which your father and mother once gave her.

“Your friend, my dear, always,

“HARRIET GARTH.”

V.

FROM FRANCIS CLARE, JUNR., TO MAGDALEN.

“Shanghai, China,

“April 23rd, 1847.

“MY DEAR MAGDALEN,

“I have deferred answering your letter, in consequence of the distracted state of my mind, which made me unfit to write to you. I am still unfit—but I feel I ought to delay no longer. My sense of

honour fortifies me; and I undergo the pain of writing this letter.

“My prospects in China are all at an end. The Firm, to which I was brutally consigned as if I was a bale of merchandise, has worn out my patience by a series of petty insults; and I have felt compelled from motives of self-respect, to withdraw my services, which were undervalued from the first. My returning to England, under these circumstances, is out of the question. I have been too cruelly used in my own country to wish to go back to it—even if I could. I propose embarking on board a private trading vessel in these seas, in a mercantile capacity, to make my way, if I can, for myself. How it will end, or what will happen to me next, is more than I can say. It matters little what becomes of me. I am a wanderer and an exile, entirely through the fault of others. The unfeeling desire at home to get rid of me, has accomplished its object. I am got rid of for good.

“There is only one more sacrifice left for me to make—the sacrifice of my heart’s dearest feelings. With no prospects before me, with no chance of coming home, what hope can I feel of performing my engagement to yourself? None! A more selfish man than I am, might hold you to that engagement; a less considerate man than I am, might keep you waiting for years—and to no purpose after all. Cruelly as they have been trampled on, my feelings are too sensitive to allow me to do this. I write it with the tears in my eyes—you shall not link your fate to an

outcast. Accept these heart-broken lines as releasing you from your promise. Our engagement is at an end.

“The one consolation which supports me, in bidding you farewell, is—that neither of us is to blame. You may have acted weakly, under my father’s influence, but I am sure you acted for the best. Nobody knew what the fatal consequences of driving me out of England would be, but myself—and I was not listened to. I yielded to my father, I yielded to you; and this is the end of it!

“I am suffering too acutely to write more. May you never know what my withdrawal from our engagement has cost me! I beg you will not blame yourself. It is not your fault that I have had all my energies misdirected by others—it is not your fault that I have never had a fair chance of getting on in life. Forget the deserted wretch, who breathes his heartfelt prayers for your happiness, and who will ever remain your friend and well-wisher,

“FRANCIS CLARE, JUN.”

VI.

FROM FRANCIS CLARE, SEN., TO MAGDALEN.

Enclosing the preceding Letter.

“I always told your poor father my son was a Fool; but I never knew he was a Scoundrel until the mail came in from China. I have every reason to believe

that he has left his employers under the most disgraceful circumstances. Forget him from this time forth, as I do. When you and I last set eyes on each other, you behaved well to me in this business. All I can now say in return, I do say. My girl, I am sorry for you.

“F. C.”

VII.

FROM MRS. WRAGGE TO HER HUSBAND.

“dear sir for mercy’s sake come here and help us She had a dreadful letter I don’t know what yesterday but she read it in bed and when I went in with her breakfast I found her dead and if the doctor had not been two doors off nobody else could have brought her to life again and she sits and looks dreadful and wont speak a word her eyes frighten me so I shake from head to foot oh please do come I keep things as tidy as I can and I do like her so and she used to be so kind to me and the landlord says he’s afraid she’ll destroy herself I wish I could write straight but I do shake so your dutiful wife matilda wragge excuse faults and beg you on my knees come and help us the Doctor good man will put some of his own writing into this for fear you can’t make out mine and remain once more your dutiful wife matilda wragge.”

Added by the Doctor.

“Sir,—I beg to inform you that I was yesterday called into a neighbour’s, in Vauxhall Walk, to attend

a young lady who had been suddenly taken ill. I recovered her with great difficulty from one of the most obstinate fainting fits I ever remember to have met with. Since that time she has had no relapse, but there is apparently some heavy distress weighing on her mind, which it has hitherto been found impossible to remove. She sits, as I am informed, perfectly silent and perfectly unconscious of what goes on about her, for hours together, with a letter in her hand, which she will allow nobody to take from her. If this state of depression continues, very distressing mental consequences may follow; and I only do my duty in suggesting that some relative or friend should interfere who has influence enough to rouse her.

“Your obedient servant,

“RICHARD JARVIS, M.R.C.S.”

VIII.

FROM NORAH TO MAGDALEN.

“July 5th.

“For God’s sake, write me one line to say if you are still at Birmingham, and where I can find you there! I have just heard from old Mr. Clare. Oh, Magdalen, if you have no pity on yourself, have some pity on me! The thought of you alone among strangers, the thought of you heart-broken under this dreadful blow, never leaves me for an instant. No words can tell how I feel for you! My own love, re-

member the better days at home before that cowardly villain stole his way into your heart; remember the happy time at Combe-Raven, when we were always together. Oh, don't, don't treat me like a stranger! We are alone in the world now—let me come and comfort you—let me be more than a sister to you, if I can. One line—only one line to tell me where I can find you!”

IX.

FROM MAGDALEN TO NORAH.

“ July 7th.

“ MY DEAREST NORAH,

“ All that your love for me can wish, your letter has done. You, and you alone, have found your way to my heart. I could think again, I could feel again, after reading what you have written to me. Let this assurance quiet your anxieties. My mind lives and breathes once more—it was dead until I got your letter.

“ The shock I have suffered has left a strange quietness in me. I feel as if I had parted from my former self—as if the hopes, once so dear to me, had all gone back to some past time, from which I am now far removed. I can look at the wreck of my life more calmly, Norah, than you could look at it, if we were both together again. I can trust myself, already, to write to Frank.

“ My darling, I think no woman ever knows how

utterly she has given herself up to the man she loves—until that man has ill-treated her. Can you pity my weakness if I confess to having felt a pang at my heart when I read that part of your letter which calls Frank a coward and a villain? Nobody can despise me for this, as I despise myself. I am like a dog who crawls back and licks the master's hand that has beaten him. But it is so—I would confess it to nobody but you—indeed, indeed it is so. He has deceived and deserted me; he has written me a cruel farewell—but don't call him a villain! If he repented, and came back to me, I would die rather than marry him now—but it grates on me to see that word coward written against him in your hand! If he is weak of purpose, who tried his weakness beyond what it could bear? Do you think this would have happened if Michael Vanstone had not robbed us of our own, and forced Frank away from me to China? In a week from to-day, the year of waiting would have come to an end; and I should have been Frank's wife, if my marriage portion had not been taken from me.

“You will say—after what has happened, it is well that I have escaped. My love! there is something perverse in my heart, which answers—No! Better have been Frank's wretched wife than the free woman I am now.

“I have not written to him. He sends me no address at which I could write even if I would. But I have not the wish. I will wait, before I send him *my* farewell. If a day ever comes when I have the fortune

which my father once promised I should bring to him—do you know what I would do with it? I would send it all to Frank, as my revenge on him for his letter; as the last farewell word, on my side, to the man who has deserted me. Let me live for that day! Let me live, Norah, in the hope of better times for *you*, which is all the hope I have left. When I think of your hard life, I can almost feel the tears once more in my weary eyes. I can almost think I have come back again to my former self.

“You will not think me hard-hearted and ungrateful, if I say that we must wait a little yet, before we meet? I want to be more fit to see you than I am now. I want to put Frank farther away from me, and to bring you nearer still. Are these good reasons? I don’t know—don’t ask me for reasons. Take the kiss I have put for you here, where the little circle is drawn on the paper; and let that bring us together for the present, till I write again. Good bye, my love. My heart is true to you, Norah—but I dare not see you yet.

“MAGDALEN.”

X.

FROM MAGDALEN TO MISS GARTH.

“MY DEAR MISS GARTH,

“I have been long in answering your letter; but you know what has happened, and you will forgive me.

“All that I have to say may be said in few words.

You may depend on my never making the general Sense of Propriety my enemy again: I am getting knowledge enough of the world to make it my accomplice next time. Norah will never leave another situation on my account—my life, as a public performer, is at an end. It was harmless enough, God knows—I may live, and so may you, to mourn the day when I parted from it—but I shall never return to it again. It has left me as Frank has left me, as all my better thoughts have left me—except my thoughts of Norah.

“Enough of myself! Shall I tell you some news to brighten this dull letter? Mr. Michael Vanstone is dead; and Mr. Noel Vanstone has succeeded to the possession of my fortune and Norah’s. He is quite worthy of his inheritance. In his father’s place, he would have ruined us as his father did.

“I have no more to say that you would care to know. Don’t be distressed about me. I am trying to recover my spirits—I am trying to forget the poor deluded girl who was foolish enough to be fond of Frank, in the old days at Combe-Raven. Sometimes, a pang comes which tells me the girl won’t be forgotten—but not often.

“It was very kind of you, when you wrote to such a lost creature as I am, to sign yourself—*always my friend*. ‘Always’ is a bold word, my dear old governess! I wonder whether you will ever want to recall it? It will make no difference, if you do, in the gratitude I shall always feel for the trouble you took

with me, when I was a little girl. I have ill repaid that trouble—ill repaid your kindness to me in after life. I ask your pardon and your pity. The best thing you can do for both of us, is to forget me. Affectionately yours,

“MAGDALEN.

“P.S.—I open the envelope to add one line. For God’s sake, don’t show this letter to Norah!”

XI.

FROM MAGDALEN TO CAPTAIN WRAGGE.

“Vauxhall Walk, July 17th.

“If I am not mistaken, it was arranged that I should write to you at Birmingham, as soon as I felt myself composed enough to think of the future. My mind is settled at last; and I am now able to accept the services which you have unreservedly offered to me.

“I beg you will forgive the manner in which I received you, on your arrival in this house, after hearing the news of my sudden illness. I was quite incapable of controlling myself—I was suffering an agony of mind which for the time deprived me of my senses. It is only your due that I should now thank you for treating me with great forbearance, at a time when forbearance was mercy.

“I will mention what I wish you to do, as plainly and briefly as I can.

“In the first place, I request you to dispose (as privately as possible) of every article of costume used in the dramatic Entertainment. I have done with our performances for ever; and I wish to be set free from everything which might accidentally connect me with them in the future. The key of my box is enclosed in this letter.

“The other box, which contains my own dresses, you will be kind enough to forward to this house. I do not ask you to bring it yourself, because I have a far more important commission to intrust to you.

“Referring to the note which you left for me at your departure, I conclude that you have, by this time, traced Mr. Noel Vanstone from Vauxhall Walk to the residence which he is now occupying. If you have made the discovery—and if you are quite sure of not having drawn the attention either of Mrs. Lecount or her master to yourself—I wish you to arrange immediately for my residing (with you and Mrs. Wragge) in the same town or village in which Mr. Noel Vanstone has taken up his abode. I write this, it is hardly necessary to say, under the impression that, wherever he may now be living, he is settled in the place for some little time.

“If you can find a small furnished house for me on these conditions, which is to be let by the month, take it for a month certain to begin with. Say that it is for your wife, your niece, and yourself; and use any assumed name you please, as long as it is a name that can be trusted to defeat the most suspicious in-

quiries. I leave this to your experience in such matters. The secret of who we really are, must be kept as strictly as if it was a secret on which our lives depend.

“Any expenses to which you may be put in carrying out my wishes, I will immediately repay. If you easily find the sort of house I want, there is no need for your returning to London to fetch us. We can join you as soon as we know where to go. The house must be perfectly respectable, and must be reasonably near to Mr. Noel Vanstone’s present residence, wherever that is.

“You must allow me to be silent in this letter as to the object which I have now in view. I am unwilling to risk an explanation in writing. When all our preparations are made, you shall hear what I propose to do from my own lips; and I shall expect you to tell me plainly in return, whether you will, or will not, give me the help I want, on the best terms which I am able to offer you.

“One word more before I seal up this letter.

“If any opportunity falls in your way, after you have taken the house, and before we join you, of exchanging a few civil words either with Mr. Noel Vanstone or Mrs. Lecount, take advantage of it. It is very important to my present object that we should become acquainted with each other—as the purely accidental result of our being near neighbours. I want you to smooth the way towards this end, if you can, before Mrs. Wragge and I come to you. Pray throw away no chance of observing Mrs. Lecount, in

particular, very carefully. Whatever help you can give me at the outset, in blindfolding that woman's sharp eyes, will be the most precious help I have ever received at your hands.

“There is no need to answer this letter immediately—unless I have written it under a mistaken impression of what you have accomplished since leaving London. I have taken our lodgings on for another week; and I can wait to hear from you, until you are able to send me such news as I wish to receive. You may be quite sure of my patience for the future, under all possible circumstances. My caprices are at an end; and my violent temper has tried your forbearance for the last time.

“MAGDALEN.”

XII.

FROM CAPTAIN WRAGGE TO MAGDALEN.

“North Shingles Villa, Aldborough, Suffolk,
“July 22nd.

“MY DEAR GIRL,

“Your letter has charmed and touched me. Your excuses have gone straight to my heart; and your confidence in my humble abilities has followed in the same direction. The pulse of the old militiaman throbs with pride as he thinks of the trust you have placed in him, and vows to deserve it. Don't be surprised at this genial outburst. All enthusiastic natures must explode occasionally: and *my* form of explosion is—Words.

“Everything you wanted me to do, is done. The house is taken; the name is found; and I am personally acquainted with Mrs. Lecount. After reading this general statement, you will naturally be interested in possessing your mind next of the accompanying details. Here they are, at your service :

“The day after leaving you in London, I traced Mr. Noel Vanstone to this curious little sea-side snug-gery. One of his father’s innumerable bargains was a house at Aldborough—a rising watering-place, or Mr. Michael Vanstone would not have invested a farthing in it. In this house the despicable little miser who lived rent free in London, now lives rent free again, on the coast of Suffolk. He is settled in his present abode for the summer and autumn; and you and Mrs. Wragge have only to join me here, to be established five doors away from him in this elegant villa. I have got the whole house for three guineas a week, with the option of remaining through the autumn at the same price. In a fashionable watering-place, such a residence would have been cheap at double the money.

“Our new name has been chosen with a wary eye to your suggestions. My books—I hope you have not forgotten my Books?—contain, under the heading of *Skins To Jump Into*, a list of individuals retired from this mortal scene, with whose names, families, and circumstances, I am well acquainted. Into some of those Skins I have been compelled to Jump, in the exercise of my profession, at former periods of my

career. Others are still in the condition of new dresses, and remain to be tried on. The Skin which will exactly fit us, originally clothed the bodies of a family named Bygrave. I am in Mr. Bygrave's skin at this moment—and it fits without a wrinkle. If you will oblige me by slipping into Miss Bygrave (Christian name, Susan); and if you will afterwards push Mrs. Wragge—anyhow; head foremost if you like—into Mrs. Bygrave (Christian name, Julia), the transformation will be complete. Permit me to inform you that I am your paternal uncle. My worthy brother was established twenty years ago, in the mahogany and logwood trade at Belize, Honduras. He died in that place; and is buried on the south-west side of the local cemetery, with a neat monument of native wood carved by a self-taught negro artist. Nineteen months afterwards, his widow died of apoplexy at a boarding-house in Cheltenham. She was supposed to be the most corpulent woman in England; and was accommodated on the ground floor of the house in consequence of the difficulty of getting her up and down stairs. You are her only child; you have been under my care since the sad event at Cheltenham; you are twenty-one years old on the second of August next; and, corpulence excepted, you are the living image of your mother. I trouble you with these specimens of my intimate knowledge of our new family Skin, to quiet your mind on the subject of future inquiries. Trust to me and my Books to satisfy any amount of inquiry. In the mean time, write down our new name

and address, and see how they strike you:—‘Mr. Bygrave, Mrs. Bygrave, Miss Bygrave; North Shingles Villa, Aldborough.’ Upon my life, it reads remarkably well!

“The last detail I have to communicate refers to my acquaintance with Mrs. Lecount.

“We met yesterday, in the grocer’s shop here. Keeping my ears open, I found that Mrs. Lecount wanted a particular kind of tea, which the man had not got, and which he believed could not be procured any nearer than Ipswich. I instantly saw my way to beginning an acquaintance, at the trifling expense of a journey to that flourishing city. ‘I have business, to-day, in Ipswich,’ I said, ‘and I propose returning to Aldborough (if I can get back in time) this evening. Pray allow me to take your order for the tea, and to bring it back with my own parcels.’ Mrs. Lecount politely declined giving me the trouble—I politely insisted on taking it. We fell into conversation. There is no need to trouble you with our talk. The result of it on my mind is—that Mrs. Lecount’s one weak point, if she has such a thing at all, is a taste for science, implanted by her deceased husband, the Professor. I think I see a chance here, of working my way into her good graces, and casting a little needful dust into those handsome black eyes of hers. Acting on this idea, when I purchased the lady’s tea at Ipswich, I also bought on my own account that far-famed pocket manual of knowledge, ‘Joyce’s Scientific Dialogues.’ Possessing, as I do, a quick memory and boundless

confidence in myself, I propose privately inflating my new skin with as much ready-made science as it will hold, and presenting Mr. Bygrave to Mrs. Lecount's notice in the character of the most highly informed man she has met with since the Professor's death. The necessity of blindfolding that woman (to use your own admirable expression) is as clear to me as to you. If it is to be done in the way I propose, make your mind easy—Wragge, inflated by Joyce, is the man to do it.

“ You now have my whole budget of news. Am I, or am I not, worthy of your confidence in me? I say nothing of my devouring anxiety to know what your objects really are—that anxiety will be satisfied when we meet. Never yet, my dear girl, did I long to administer a productive pecuniary Squeeze to any human creature, as I long to administer it to Mr. Noel Vanstone. I say no more. *Verbum sap.* Pardon the pedantry of a Latin quotation, and believe me,

“ Entirely yours,

“ HORATIO WRAGGE.

“ P. S.—I await my instructions, as you requested. You have only to say whether I shall return to London for the purpose of escorting you to this place—or whether I shall wait here to receive you. The house is in perfect order—the weather is charming—and the sea is as smooth as Mrs. Lecount's apron. She has just passed the window; and we have exchanged bows. A sharp woman, my dear Magdalen—but Joyce and I together, may prove a trifle too much for her.”

XIII.

Extract from the East Suffolk Argus.

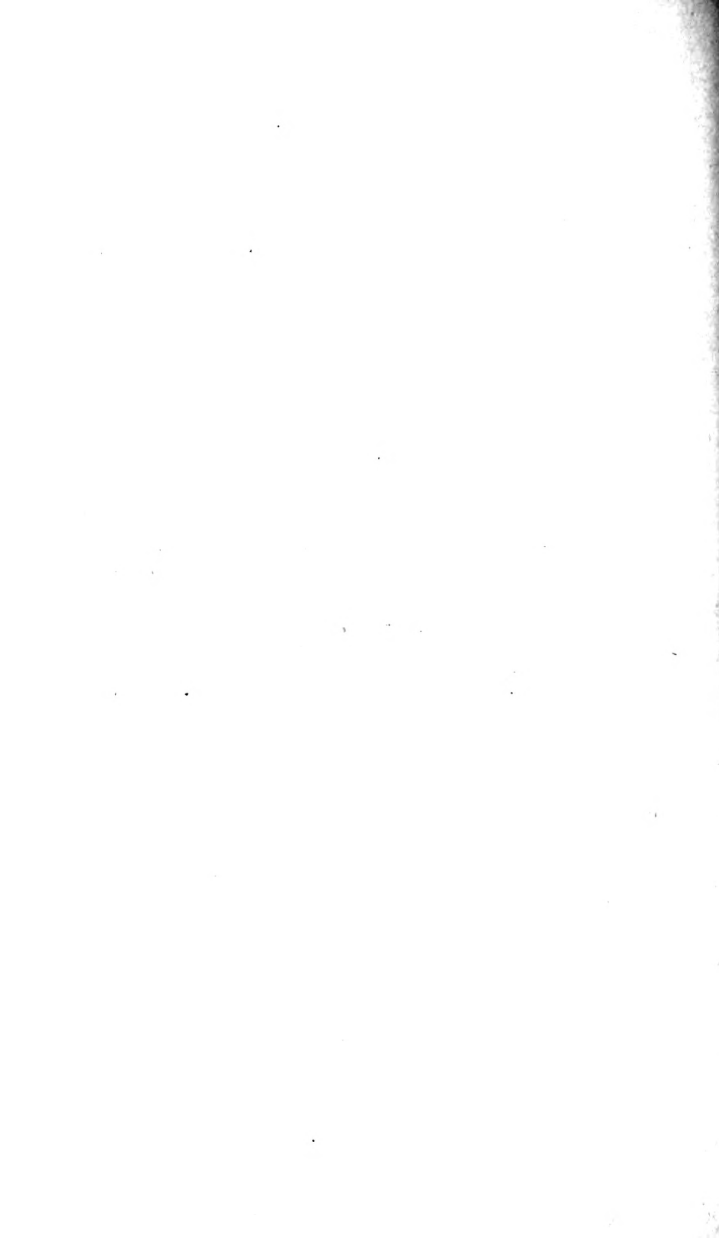
“ALDBOROUGH.—We notice with pleasure the arrival of visitors to this healthful and far-famed watering-place, earlier in the season than usual during the present year. *Esto Perpetua* is all we have to say.

“VISITORS' LIST.—Arrivals since our last. North Shingles Villa—Mrs. Bygrave; Miss Bygrave.”

THE FOURTH SCENE.



ALDBOROUGH, SUFFOLK.



THE FOURTH SCENE.

CHAPTER I.

THE most striking spectacle presented to a stranger by the shores of Suffolk, is the extraordinary defencelessness of the land against the encroachments of the sea.

At Aldborough, as elsewhere on this coast, local traditions are, for the most part, traditions which have been literally drowned. The site of the old town, once a populous and thriving port, has almost entirely disappeared in the sea. The German Ocean has swallowed up streets, market-places, jetties, and public walks; and the merciless waters, consummating their work of devastation, closed, no longer than eighty years since, over the salt-master's cottage at Aldborough, now famous in memory only, as the birth-place of the poet CRABBE.

Thrust back year after year by the advancing waves, the inhabitants have receded, in the present century, to the last morsel of land which is firm enough to be built

on—a strip of ground hemmed in between a marsh on one side and the sea on the other. Here—trusting for their future security to certain sandhills which the capricious waves have thrown up to encourage them—the people of Aldborough have boldly established their quaint little watering-place. The first fragment of their earthly possessions, is a low natural dyke of shingle, surmounted by a public path which runs parallel with the sea. Bordering this path in a broken, uneven line are the villa residences of modern Aldborough—fanciful little houses, standing mostly in their own gardens, and possessing here and there, as horticultural ornaments, staring figure-heads of ships, doing duty for statues among the flowers. Viewed from the low level on which these villas stand, the sea, in certain conditions of the atmosphere, appears to be higher than the land: coasting vessels gliding by, assume gigantic proportions, and look alarmingly near the windows. Intermixed with the houses of the better sort, are buildings of other forms and periods. In one direction, the tiny Gothic town-hall of old Aldborough—once the centre of the vanished port and borough—now stands fronting the modern villas close on the margin of the sea. At another point, a wooden tower of observation, crowned by the figure-head of a wrecked Russian vessel, rises high above the neighbouring houses; and discloses through its scuttle-window, grave men in dark clothing, seated on the topmost story, perpetually on the watch—the pilots of Aldborough looking out from their tower, for ships in

want of help. Behind the row of buildings thus curiously intermingled, runs the one straggling street of the town, with its sturdy pilots' cottages, its mouldering marine storehouses, and its composite shops. Towards the northern end, this street is bounded by the one eminence visible over all the marshy flat—a low wooded hill on which the church is built. At its opposite extremity, the street leads to a deserted martello tower, and to the forlorn out-lying suburb of Slaughden, between the river Alde and the sea. Such are the main characteristics of this curious little outpost on the shores of England, as it appears at the present time.

On a hot and cloudy July afternoon, and on the second day which had elapsed since he had written to Magdalen, Captain Wragge sauntered through the gate of North Shingles Villa, to meet the arrival of the coach, which then connected Aldborough with the Eastern Counties Railway. He reached the principal inn as the coach drove up; and was ready at the door to receive Magdalen and Mrs. Wragge, on their leaving the vehicle.

The captain's reception of his wife was not characterized by an instant's unnecessary waste of time. He looked distrustfully at her shoes—raised himself on tiptoe—set her bonnet straight for her with a sharp tug—said, in a loud whisper, “hold your tongue”—and left her, for the time being, without further notice. His welcome to Magdalen, beginning with the usual

flow of words, stopped suddenly in the middle of the first sentence. Captain Wragge's eye was a sharp one; and it instantly showed him something in the look and manner of his old pupil which denoted a serious change.

There was a settled composure on her face which, except when she spoke, made it look as still and cold as marble. Her voice was softer and more equable, her eyes were steadier, her step was slower than of old. When she smiled, the smile came and went suddenly, and showed a little nervous contraction on one side of her mouth, never visible there before. She was perfectly patient with Mrs. Wragge; she treated the captain with a courtesy and consideration entirely new in his experience of her—but she was interested in nothing. The curious little shops in the back street; the high impending sea; the old town-hall on the beach; the pilots, the fishermen, the passing ships—she noticed all these objects as indifferently as if Aldborough had been familiar to her from her infancy. Even when the captain drew up at the garden-gate of North Shingles, and introduced her triumphantly to the new house, she hardly looked at it. The first question she asked related, not to her own residence, but to Noel Vanstone's.

“How near to us does he live?” she inquired, with the only betrayal of emotion which had escaped her yet.

Captain Wragge answered by pointing to the fifth villa from North Shingles, on the Slaughden side of

Aldborough. Magdalen suddenly drew back from the garden-gate as he indicated the situation, and walked away by herself to obtain a nearer view of the house.

Captain Wragge looked after her, and shook his head discontentedly.

“May I speak now?” inquired a meek voice behind him, articulating respectfully ten inches above the top of his straw hat.

The captain turned round, and confronted his wife. The more than ordinary bewilderment visible in her face, at once suggested to him that Magdalen had failed to carry out the directions in his letter; and that Mrs. Wragge had arrived at Aldborough, without being properly aware of the total transformation to be accomplished in her identity and her name. The necessity of setting this doubt at rest was too serious to be trifled with; and Captain Wragge instituted the necessary inquiries without a moment’s delay.

“Stand straight, and listen to me,” he began. “I have a question to ask you. Do you know whose Skin you are in at this moment? Do you know that you are dead and buried in London; and that you have risen like a phoenix from the ashes of Mrs. Wragge? No! you evidently don’t know it. This is perfectly disgraceful. What is your name?”

“Matilda,” answered Mrs. Wragge, in a state of the densest bewilderment.

“Nothing of the sort!” cried the captain, fiercely. “How dare you tell me you name’s Matilda? Your name is Julia. Who am I? Hold that basket of

sandwiches straight, or I'll pitch it into the sea!—Who am I?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Wragge, meekly taking refuge in the negative side of the question, this time.

"Sit down!" said her husband, pointing to the low garden wall of North Shingles Villa. "More to the right! More still! That will do. You don't know?" repeated the captain, sternly confronting his wife, as soon as he had contrived, by seating her, to place her face on a level with his own. "Don't let me hear you say that a second time. Don't let me have a woman who doesn't know who I am, to operate on my beard to-morrow morning. Look at me! More to the left—more still—that will do. Who am I? I'm Mr. Bygrave—Christian name, Thomas. Who are you? You're Mrs. Bygrave—Christian name, Julia. Who is that young lady who travelled with you from London? That young lady is Miss Bygrave—Christian name, Susan. I'm her clever uncle Tom; and you're her addle-headed aunt Julia. Say it all over to me instantly, like the Catechism! What is your name?"

"Spare my poor head!" pleaded Mrs. Wragge. "Oh please spare my poor head till I've got the stage-coach out of it!"

"Don't distress her," said Magdalen, joining them at that moment. "She will learn it in time. Come into the house."

Captain Wragge shook his wary head once more. "We are beginning badly," he said, with less polite-

ness than usual. "My wife's stupidity stands in our way already."

They went into the house. Magdalen was perfectly satisfied with all the captain's arrangements; she accepted the room which he had set apart for her; approved of the woman servant whom he had engaged; presented herself at tea-time the moment she was summoned—but still showed no interest whatever in the new scene around her. Soon after the table was cleared, although the daylight had not yet faded out, Mrs. Wragge's customary drowsiness after fatigue of any kind, overcame her; and she received her husband's orders to leave the room (taking care that she left it "up at heel"), and to betake herself (strictly in the character of Mrs. Bygrave) to bed. * As soon as they were left alone, the captain looked hard at Magdalen, and waited to be spoken to. She said nothing. He ventured next on opening the conversation by a polite inquiry after the state of her health. "You look fatigued," he remarked, in his most insinuating manner. "I am afraid the journey has been too much for you."

"No," she replied, looking out listlessly through the window; "I am not more tired than usual. I am always weary now—weary at going to bed; weary at getting up. If you would like to hear what I have to say to you, to-night—I am willing and ready to say it. Can't we go out? It is very hot here; and the droning of those men's voices is beyond all endurance." She pointed through the window to a group of boatmen,

idling, as only nautical men can idle, against the garden wall. "Is there no quiet walk in this wretched place?" she asked, impatiently. "Can't we breathe a little fresh air, and escape being annoyed by strangers?"

"There is perfect solitude within half-an-hour's walk of the house," replied the ready captain.

"Very well. Come out, then."

With a weary sigh, she took up her straw bonnet and her light muslin scarf from the side table upon which she had thrown them on coming in; and carelessly led the way to the door. Captain Wragge followed her to the garden-gate—then stopped, struck by a new idea.

"Excuse me," he whispered, confidentially. "In my wife's existing state of ignorance as to who she is, we had better not trust her alone in the house with a new servant. I'll privately turn the key on her, in case she wakes before we come back. Safe bind, safe find—you know the proverb!—I will be with you again in a moment."

He hastened back to the house; and Magdalen seated herself on the garden-wall to await his return.

She had hardly settled herself in that position, when two gentlemen walking together, whose approach along the public path she had not previously noticed, passed close by her.

The dress of one of the two strangers showed him to be a clergyman. His companion's station in life was less easily discernible to ordinary observation. Prac-

tised eyes would probably have seen enough in his look, his manner, and his walk, to show that he was a sailor. He was a man in the prime of life ; tall, spare, and muscular ; his face sunburnt to a deep brown ; his black hair just turning grey ; his eyes dark, deep, and firm—the eyes of a man with an iron resolution, and a habit of command. He was the nearest of the two to Magdalen, as he and his friend passed the place where she was sitting ; and he looked at her with a sudden surprise at her beauty, with an open, hearty, undisguised admiration, which was too evidently sincere, too evidently beyond his own control to be justly resented as insolent—and yet, in her humour at that moment, Magdalen did resent it. She felt the man's resolute black eyes strike through her with an electric suddenness ; and frowning at him impatiently, she turned away her head, and looked back at the house.

The next moment she glanced round again, to see if he had gone on. He had advanced a few yards—had then evidently stopped—and was now in the very act of turning to look at her once more. His companion, the clergyman, noticing that Magdalen appeared to be annoyed, took him familiarly by the arm ; and, half in jest, half in earnest, forced him to walk on. The two disappeared round the corner of the next house. As they turned it, the sunburnt sailor twice stopped his companion again, and twice looked back.

“ A friend of yours ? ” inquired Captain Wragge joining Magdalen at that moment.

“Certainly not,” she replied, “a perfect stranger. He stared at me in the most impertinent manner. Does he belong to this place?”

“I’ll find out in a moment,” said the compliant captain; joining the group of boatmen, and putting his questions right and left, with the easy familiarity which distinguished him. He returned in a few minutes with a complete budget of information. The clergyman was well known as the rector of a place situated some few miles inland. The dark man with him, was his wife’s brother, commander of a ship in the merchant service. He was supposed to be staying with his relatives, as their guest for a short time only, preparatory to sailing on another voyage. The clergyman’s name was Strickland, and the merchant captain’s name was Kirke—and that was all the boatmen knew about either of them.

“It is of no consequence who they are,” said Magdalen, carelessly. “The man’s rudeness merely annoyed me for the moment. Let us have done with him. I have something else to think of—and so have you. Where is the solitary walk you mentioned just now? Which way do we go?”

The captain pointed southward, towards Slaughden, and offered his arm.

Magdalen hesitated before she took it. Her eyes wandered away inquiringly to Noel Vanstone’s house. He was out in the garden; pacing backwards and forwards over the little lawn, with his head high in the air, and with Mrs. Lecount demurely in attendance on

him, carrying her master's green fan. Seeing this, Magdalen at once took Captain Wragge's right arm, so as to place herself nearest to the garden when they passed it on their walk.

"The eyes of our neighbours are on us; and the least your niece can do is to take your arm," she said, with a bitter laugh. "Come! let us go on."

"They are looking this way," whispered the captain. "Shall I introduce you to Mrs. Lecount?"

"Not to-night," she answered. "Wait, and hear what I have to say to you first."

They passed the garden-wall. Captain Wragge took off his hat with a smart flourish, and received a gracious bow from Mrs. Lecount in return. Magdalen saw the housekeeper survey her face, her figure, and her dress, with that reluctant interest, that distrustful curiosity, which women feel in observing each other. As she walked on beyond the house, the sharp voice of Noel Vanstone reached her through the evening stillness. "A fine girl, Lecount," she heard him say. "You know I am a judge of that sort of thing—a fine girl!"

As those words were spoken, Captain Wragge looked round at his companion, in sudden surprise. Her hand was trembling violently on his arm, and her lips were fast closed with an expression of speechless pain.

Slowly and in silence the two walked on, until they reached the southern limit of the houses, and entered on a little wilderness of shingle and withered grass—

the desolate end of Aldborough, the lonely beginning of Slaughden.

It was a dull airless evening. Eastward was the grey majesty of the sea, hushed in breathless calm; the horizon line invisibly melting into the monotonous misty sky; the idle ships shadowy and still on the idle water. Southward, the high ridge of the sea dyke, and the grim massive circle of a martello tower, reared high on its mound of grass, closed the view darkly on all that lay beyond. Westward, a lurid streak of sunset glowed red in the dreary heaven—blackened the fringing trees on the far borders of the great inland marsh—and turned its little gleaming water-pools to pools of blood. Nearer to the eye, the sullen flow of the tidal river Alde, ebbed noiselessly from the muddy banks; and nearer still, lonely and unprosperous by the bleak waterside, lay the lost little port of Slaughden; with its forlorn wharfs and warehouses of decaying wood, and its few scattered coasting vessels deserted on the oozy river-shore. No fall of waves was heard on the beach; no trickling of waters bubbled audibly from the idle stream. Now and then, the cry of a sea-bird rose from the region of the marsh; and, at intervals, from farm-houses far in the inland waste, the faint winding of horns to call the cattle home, travelled mournfully through the evening calm.

Magdalen drew her hand from the captain's arm, and led the way to the mound of the martello tower. "I am weary of walking," she said. "Let us stop and rest here."

She seated herself on the slope, and resting on her elbow, mechanically pulled up and scattered from her into the air the tufts of grass growing under her hand. After silently occupying herself in this way for some minutes, she turned suddenly on Captain Wragge. "Do I surprise you?" she asked with a startling abruptness. "Do you find me changed?"

The captain's ready tact warned him that the time had come to be plain with her, and to reserve his flowers of speech for a more appropriate occasion.

"If you ask the question, I must answer it," he replied. "Yes: I do find you changed."

She pulled up another tuft of grass. "I suppose you can guess the reason?" she said.

The captain was wisely silent. He only answered by a bow.

"I have lost all care for myself," she went on tearing faster and faster at the tufts of grass. "Saying that, is not saying much, perhaps—but it may help you to understand me. There are things I would have died sooner than do, at one time—things it would have turned me cold to think of. I don't care now, whether I do them or not. I am nothing to myself; I am no more interested in myself than I am in these handfuls of grass. I suppose I have lost something. What is it? Heart? Conscience? I don't know. Do you? What nonsense I am talking! Who cares what I have lost? It has gone: and there's an end of it. I suppose my outside is the best side of me—and that's left at any rate. I have not lost my good looks,

have I? There! there! never mind answering; don't trouble yourself to pay me compliments. I have been admired enough to-day. First the sailor, and then Mr. Noel Vanstone—enough for any woman's vanity surely! Have I any right to call myself a woman? Perhaps not: I am only a girl in my teens. Oh me, I feel as if I was forty!" She scattered the last fragments of grass to the winds; and, turning her back on the captain, let her head droop till her cheek touched the turf bank. "It feels soft and friendly," she said, nestling to it with a hopeless tenderness horrible to see. "It doesn't cast me off. Mother Earth! The only mother I have left!"

Captain Wragge looked at her in silent surprise. Such experience of humanity as *he* possessed, was powerless to sound to its depths the terrible self-abandonment which had burst its way to the surface in her reckless words—which was now fast hurrying her to actions more reckless still. "Devilish odd!" he thought to himself uneasily. "Has the loss of her lover turned her brain?" He considered for a minute longer, and then spoke to her. "Leave it till to-morrow," suggested the captain confidentially. "You are a little tired to-night. No hurry, my dear girl—no hurry."

She raised her head instantly, and looked round at him, with the same angry resolution, with the same desperate defiance of herself, which he had seen in her face, on the memorable day at York when she had acted before him for the first time. "I came here to

tell you what is in my mind," she said ; " and, I *will* tell it ! " She seated herself upright on the slope ; and clasping her hands round her knees, looked out steadily, straight before her, at the slowly darkening view. In that strange position, she waited until she had composed herself ; and then addressed the captain, without turning her head to look round at him, in these words :

" When you and I first met," she began abruptly, " I tried hard to keep my thoughts to myself. I know enough, by this time, to know that I failed. When I first told you at York that Michael Vanstone had ruined us, I believe you guessed for yourself that I, for one, was determined not to submit to it. Whether you guessed or not, it is so. I left my friends with that determination in my mind ; and I feel it in me now, stronger, ten times stronger, than ever."

" Ten times stronger than ever," echoed the captain. " Exactly so—the natural result of firmness of character."

" No. The natural result of having nothing else to think of. I had something else to think of, before you found me ill in Vauxhall Walk. I have nothing else to think of now. Remember that—if you find me, for the future, always harping on the same string. One question first. Did you guess what I meant to do, on that morning when you showed me the newspaper, and when I read the account of Michael Vanstone's death ?"

" Generally," replied Captain Wragge—" I guessed, generally, that you proposed dipping your hand into

his purse, and taking from it (most properly) what was your own. I felt deeply hurt at the time by your not permitting me to assist you. Why is she so reserved with me? (I remarked to myself)—why is she so unreasonably reserved?”

“You shall have no reserve to complain of now,” pursued Magdalen. “I tell you plainly—if events had not happened as they did, you *would* have assisted me. If Michael Vanstone had not died, I should have gone to Brighton, and have found my way safely to his acquaintance under an assumed name. I had money enough with me to live on respectably for many months together. I would have employed that time, I would have waited a whole year, if necessary, to destroy Mrs. Lecount’s influence over him—and I would have ended by getting that influence on my own terms, into my own hands. I had the advantage of years, the advantage of novelty, the advantage of downright desperation, all on my side; and I should have succeeded. Before the year was out—before half the year was out—you should have seen Mrs. Lecount dismissed by her master; and you should have seen me taken into the house, in her place, as Michael Vanstone’s adopted daughter—as the faithful friend who had saved him from an adventuress in his old age. Girls no older than I am have tried deceptions as hopeless in appearance as mine, and have carried them through to the end. I had my story ready; I had my plans all considered; I had the weak point in that old man to attack, in my way, which Mrs. Lecount

had found out before me to attack in hers—and I tell you again I should have succeeded.”

“I think you would,” said the captain. “And what next?”

“Mr. Michael Vanstone would have changed his man of business, next. You would have succeeded to the place; and those clever speculations on which he was so fond of venturing, would have cost him the fortunes of which he had robbed my sister and myself. To the last farthing, Captain Wragge—as certainly as you sit there, to the last farthing! A bold conspiracy, a shocking deception—wasn’t it? I don’t care! Any conspiracy, any deception, is justified to my conscience by the vile law which has left us helpless. You talked of my reserve just now. Have I dropped it at last? Have I spoken out at the eleventh hour?”

The captain laid his hand solemnly on his heart, and launched himself once more on his broadest flow of language.

“You fill me with unavailing regret,” he said. “If that old man had lived, what a crop I might have reaped from him! What enormous transactions in moral agriculture it might have been my privilege to carry on! *Ars longa*,” said Captain Wragge, pathetically drifting into Latin—“*vita brevis!* Let us drop a tear on the lost opportunities of the past, and try what the present can do to console us. One conclusion is clear to my mind. The experiment you proposed to try with Mr. Michael Vanstone, is totally hopeless, my dear girl, in the case of his son. His son is impervious

to all common forms of pecuniary temptation. You may trust my solemn assurance," continued the captain, speaking with an indignant recollection of the answer to his advertisement in the Times, "when I inform you that Mr. Noel Vanstone is, emphatically, the meanest of mankind."

"I can trust my own experience as well," said Magdalen. "I have seen him and spoken to him—I know him better than you do. Another disclosure, Captain Wragge, for your private ear! I sent you back certain articles of costume—when they had served the purpose for which I took them to London. That purpose was to find my way to Noel Vanstone, in disguise, and to judge for myself of Mrs. Lecount and her master. I gained my object; and I tell you again, I know the two people in that house yonder whom we have now to deal with, better than you do."

Captain Wragge expressed the profound astonishment, and asked the innocent questions appropriate to the mental condition of a person taken completely by surprise.

"Well," he resumed, when Magdalen had briefly answered him; "and what is the result on your own mind? There must be a result, or we should not be here. You see your way? Of course, my dear girl, you see your way?"

"Yes," she said quickly. "I see my way."

The captain drew a little nearer to her, with eager curiosity expressed in every line of his vagabond face.

“Go on,” he said in an anxious whisper; “pray go on.”

She looked out thoughtfully into the gathering darkness, without answering, without appearing to have heard him. Her lips closed; and her clasped hands tightened mechanically round her knees.

“There is no disguising the fact,” said Captain Wragge, warily rousing her into speaking to him. “The son is harder to deal with than the father——”

“Not in my way,” she interposed, suddenly.

“Indeed!” said the captain. “Well! they say there is a short cut to everything, if we only look long enough to find it. You have looked long enough, I suppose; and the natural result has followed—you have found it.”

“I have not troubled myself to look; I have found it without looking.”

“The deuce you have!” cried Captain Wragge in great perplexity. “My dear girl, is my view of your present position leading me altogether astray? As I understand it, here is Mr. Noel Vanstone in possession of your fortune and your sister’s, as his father was—and determined to keep it, as his father was?”

“Yes.”

“And here are you—quite helpless to get it by persuasion—quite helpless to get it by law—just as resolute in his case, as you were in his father’s, to take it by stratagem in spite of him?”

“Just as resolute? Not for the sake of the fortune—mind that! For the sake o. the right.”

“Just so. And the means of coming at that right which were hard with the father—who was not a miser—are easy with the son, who is?”

“Perfectly easy.”

“Write me down an Ass, for the first time in my life!” cried the captain, at the end of his patience. “Hang me if I know what you mean!”

She looked round at him for the first time—looked him straight and steadily in the face.

“I will tell you what I mean,” she said. “I mean to marry him.”

Captain Wragge started up on his knees; and stopped on them, petrified by astonishment.

“Remember what I told you,” said Magdalen, looking away from him again. “I have lost all care for myself. I have only one end in life now; and the sooner I reach it—and die—the better. If——” She stopped; altered her position a little; and pointed with one hand to the fast-ebbing stream beneath her, gleaming dim in the darkening twilight—“if I had been what I once was, I would have thrown myself into that river sooner than do what I am going to do now. As it is, I trouble myself no longer; I weary my mind with no more schemes. The short way and the vile way, lies before me. I take it, Captain Wragge—and marry him.”

“Keeping him in total ignorance of who you are?” said the captain, slowly rising to his feet, and slowly moving round, so as to see her face. “Marrying him, as my niece, Miss Bygrave?”

“As your niece, Miss Bygrave.”

“And after the marriage——?” His voice faltered, as he began the question, and he left it unfinished.

“After the marriage,” she said, “I shall stand in no further need of your assistance.”

The captain stooped, as she gave him that answer—looked close at her—and suddenly drew back, without uttering a word. He walked away some paces, and sat down again doggedly on the grass. If Magdalen could have seen his face, in the dying light, his face would have startled her. For the first time, probably, since his boyhood, Captain Wragge had changed colour. He was deadly pale.

“Have you nothing to say to me?” she asked. “Perhaps you are waiting to hear what terms I have to offer? These are my terms. I pay all our expenses here; and when we part, on the day of the marriage, you take a farewell gift away with you of two hundred pounds. Do you promise me your assistance on those conditions?”

“What am I expected to do?” he asked, with a furtive look at her, and a sudden distrust in his voice.

“You are expected to preserve my assumed character and your own,” she answered; “and you are to prevent any inquiries of Mrs. Lecount’s from discovering who I really am. I ask no more. The rest is my responsibility—not yours.”

“I have nothing to do with what happens—at any time, or in any place—after the marriage?”

“Nothing whatever.”

“I may leave you at the church door, if I please?”

“At the church door—with your fee in your pocket.”

“Paid from the money in your own possession?”

“Certainly! How else should I pay it?”

Captain Wragge took off his hat, and passed his handkerchief over his face with an air of relief.

“Give me a minute to consider it,” he said.

“As many minutes as you like,” she rejoined, reclining on the bank in her former position, and returning to her former occupation of tearing up the tufts of grass and flinging them out into the air.

The captain's reflections were not complicated by any unnecessary divergences, from the contemplation of his own position to the contemplation of Magdalen's. Utterly incapable of appreciating the injury done her by Frank's infamous treachery to his engagement—an injury which had severed her, at one cruel blow, from the aspiration which, delusion though it was, had been the saving aspiration of her life—Captain Wragge accepted the simple fact of her despair, just as he found it; and then looked straight to the consequences of the proposal which she had made to him.

In the prospect *before* the marriage he saw nothing more serious involved than the practice of a deception, in no important degree different—except in the end to be attained by it—from the deceptions which his vagabond life had long since accustomed him to contemplate and to carry out. In the prospect *after* the marriage, he dimly discerned, through the ominous darkness of

the future, the lurking phantoms of Terror and Crime, and the black gulfs behind them of Ruin and Death. A man of boundless audacity and resource, within his own mean limits ; beyond those limits, the captain was as deferentially submissive to the majesty of the law as the most harmless man in existence ; as cautious in looking after his own personal safety, as the veriest coward that ever walked the earth. But one serious question now filled his mind. Could he, on the terms proposed to him, join the conspiracy against Noel Vanstone up to the point of the marriage—and then withdraw from it, without risk of involving himself in the consequences which his experience told him, must certainly ensue.

Strange as it may seem, his decision, in this emergency, was mainly influenced by no less a person than Noel Vanstone himself. The captain might have resisted the money-offer which Magdalen had made to him—for the profits of the Entertainment had filled his pockets with more than three times two hundred pounds. But the prospect of dealing a blow in the dark at the man who had estimated his information and himself at the value of a five-pound note, proved too much for his caution and his self-control. On the small neutral ground of self-importance, the best men and the worst meet on the same terms. Captain Wragge's indignation, when he saw the answer to his advertisement, stooped to no retrospective estimate of his own conduct : he was as deeply offended, as sincerely angry, as if he had made a perfectly honourable pro-

posal, and had been rewarded for it by a personal insult. He had been too full of his own grievance, to keep it out of his first letter to Magdalen. He had more or less forgotten himself, on every subsequent occasion when Noel Vanstone's name was mentioned. And in now finally deciding the course he should take, it is not too much to say, that the motive of money receded, for the first time in his life, into the second place—and the motive of malice carried the day.

“I accept the terms,” said Captain Wragge, getting briskly on his legs again. “Subject, of course, to the conditions agreed on between us. We part on the wedding-day. I don't ask where you go: you don't ask where I go. From that time forth we are strangers to each other.”

Magdalen rose slowly from the mound. A hopeless depression, a sullen despair, showed itself in her look and manner. She refused the captain's offered hand; and her tones, when she answered him, were so low that he could hardly hear her.

“We understand each other,” she said; “and we can now go back. You may introduce me to Mrs. Lecount to-morrow.”

“I must ask a few questions first,” said the captain, gravely. “There are more risks to be run in this matter, and more pitfalls in our way, than you seem to suppose. I must know the whole history of your morning call on Mrs. Lecount, before I put you and that woman on speaking terms with each other.”

“Wait till to-morrow,” she broke out impatiently. “Don’t madden me by talking about it to-night.”

The captain said no more. They turned their faces towards Aldborough, and walked slowly back.

By the time they reached the houses, night had overtaken them. Neither moon nor stars were visible. A faint noiseless breeze, blowing from the land, had come with the darkness. Magdalen paused on the lonely public walk to breathe the air more freely. After a while, she turned her face from the breeze, and looked out towards the sea. The immeasurable silence of the calm waters, lost in the black void of night, was awful. She stood looking into the darkness, as if its mystery had no secrets for her—she advanced towards it slowly, as if it drew her by some hidden attraction into itself.

“I am going down to the sea,” she said to her companion. “Wait here, and I will come back.”

He lost sight of her in an instant—it was as if the night had swallowed her up. He listened, and counted her footsteps by the crashing of them on the shingle in the deep stillness. They retreated slowly, farther and farther away into the night. Suddenly, the sound of them ceased. Had she paused on her course? or had she reached one of the strips of sand left bare by the ebbing tide?

He waited, and listened anxiously. The time passed and no sound reached him. He still listened with a growing distrust of the darkness. Another moment, and there came a sound from the invisible shore. Far

and faint from the beach below, a long cry moaned through the silence. Then, all was still once more.

In sudden alarm, he stepped forward to descend to the beach, and to call to her. Before he could cross the path, footsteps rapidly advancing, caught his ear. He waited an instant—and the figure of a man passed quickly along the walk, between him and the sea. It was too dark to discern anything of the stranger's face; it was only possible to see that he was a tall man—as tall as that officer in the merchant service, whose name was Kirke.

The figure passed on northward, and was instantly lost to view. Captain Wragge crossed the path; and advancing a few steps down the beach, stopped, and listened again. The crash of footsteps on the shingle caught his ear once more. Slowly, as the sound had left him, that sound now came back. He called, to guide her to him. She came on till he could just see her—a shadow ascending the shingly slope, and growing out of the blackness of the night.

“You alarmed me,” he whispered nervously. “I was afraid something had happened. I heard you cry out, as if you were in pain.”

“Did you?” she said carelessly. “I *was* in pain. It doesn't matter—it's over now.”

Her hand mechanically swung something to and fro as she answered him. It was the little white silk bag, which she had always kept hidden in her bosom up to this time. One of the relics which it held—one of the relics which she had not had the heart to part with

before—was gone from its keeping for ever. Alone on a strange shore, she had torn from her the fondest of her virgin memories, the dearest of her virgin hopes. Alone on a strange shore, she had taken the lock of Frank's hair from its once-treasured place, and had cast it away from her to the sea and the night.

CHAPTER II.

THE tall man who had passed Captain Wragge in the dark, proceeded rapidly along the public walk, struck off across a little waste patch of ground, and entered the open door of the Aldborough Hotel. The light in the passage, falling full on his face as he passed it, proved the truth of Captain Wragge's surmise, and showed the stranger to be Mr. Kirke, of the merchant service.

Meeting the landlord in the passage, Mr. Kirke nodded to him with the familiarity of an old customer. "Have you got the paper?" he asked, "I want to look at the visitors' list."

"I have got it in my room, sir," said the landlord, leading the way into a parlour at the back of the house. "Are there any friends of yours staying here, do you think?"

Without replying, the seaman turned to the list, as soon as the newspaper was placed in his hand, and ran his finger down it, name by name. The finger suddenly stopped at this line: "Sea-View Cottage; Mr. Noel Vanstone." Kirke of the merchant service, repeated the name to himself; and put down the paper thoughtfully.

“Have you found anybody you know, captain?” asked the landlord.

“I have found a name I know—a name my father used often to speak of in his time. Is this Mr. Vanstone a family man? Do you know if there is a young lady in the house?”

“I can’t say, captain. My wife will be here directly: she is sure to know. It must have been some time ago, if your father knew this Mr. Vanstone?”

“It *was* some time ago. My father knew a subaltern officer of that name, when he was with his regiment in Canada. It would be curious if the person here turned out to be the same man—and if that young lady was his daughter.”

“Excuse me, captain—but the young lady seems to hang a little on your mind,” said the landlord, with a pleasant smile.

Mr. Kirke looked as if the form which his host’s good-humour had just taken, was not quite to his mind. He returned abruptly to the subaltern officer and the regiment in Canada. “That poor fellow’s story was as miserable a one as ever I heard,” he said, looking back again absently at the visitors’ list.

“Would there be any harm in telling it, sir?” asked the landlord. “Miserable or not—a story’s a story, when you know it to be true.”

Mr. Kirke hesitated. “I hardly think I should be doing right to tell it,” he said. “If this man, or any relations of his are still alive, it is not a story they might like strangers to know. All I can tell you is,

that my father was the salvation of that young officer, under very dreadful circumstances. They parted in Canada. My father remained with his regiment: the young officer sold out and returned to England—and from that moment they lost sight of each other. It would be curious if this Vanstone here was the same man. It would be curious——”

He suddenly checked himself, just as another reference to “the young lady” was on the point of passing his lips. At the same moment, the landlord’s wife came in; and Mr. Kirke at once transferred his inquiries to the higher authority in the house.

“Do you know anything of this Mr. Vanstone who is down here on the visitors’ list?” asked the sailor. “Is he an old man?”

“He’s a miserable little creature to look at,” replied the landlady—“but he’s not old, captain!”

“Then he is not the man I mean. Perhaps, he is the man’s son? Has he got any ladies with him?”

The landlady tossed her head, and pursed up her lips disparagingly.

“He has a housekeeper with him,” she said. “A middle-aged person—not one of my sort. I dare say I’m wrong—but I don’t like a dressy woman in her station of life.”

Mr. Kirke began to look puzzled. “I must have made some mistake about the house,” he said. “Surely there’s a lawn cut octagon-shape at Sea-View Cottage, and a white flag-staff in the middle of the gravel walk?”

“That’s not Sea View, sir! It’s North Shingles

your talking of. Mr. Bygrave's. His wife and his niece came here, by the coach, to-day. His wife's tall enough to be put in a show, and the worst dressed woman I ever set eyes on. But Miss Bygrave is worth looking at, if I may venture to say so. She's the finest girl, to my mind, we've had at Aldborough for many a long day. I wonder who they are! Do you know the name, captain?"

"No," said Mr. Kirke, with a shade of disappointment on his dark, weatherbeaten face; "I never heard the name before."

After replying in those words, he rose to take his leave. The landlord vainly invited him to drink a parting glass; the landlady vainly pressed him to stay another ten minutes, and try a cup of tea. He only replied that his sister expected him, and that he must return to the parsonage immediately.

On leaving the hotel, Mr. Kirke set his face westward, and walked inland along the high road, as fast as the darkness would let him.

"Bygrave?" he thought to himself. "Now I know her name, how much am I the wiser for it! If it had been Vanstone, my father's son might have had a chance of making acquaintance with her." He stopped, and looked back in the direction of Aldborough. "What a fool I am!" he burst out suddenly, striking his stick on the ground. "I was forty last birthday." He turned, and went on again faster than ever—his head down; his resolute black eyes searching the darkness on the land as they had

searched it many a time on the sea, from the deck of his ship.

After more than an hour's walking, he reached a village, with a primitive little church and parsonage nestled together in a hollow. He entered the house by the back way, and found his sister, the clergyman's wife, sitting alone over her work in the parlour.

"Where is your husband, Lizzie?" he asked, taking a chair in a corner.

"William has gone out to see a sick person. He had just time enough, before he went," she added, with a smile, "to tell me about the young lady; and he declares he will never trust himself at Aldborough with you again, until you are a steady married man." She stopped; and looked at her brother more attentively than she had looked at him yet. "Robert!" she said, laying aside her work, and suddenly crossing the room to him. "You look anxious, you look distressed. William only laughed about your meeting with the young lady. Is it serious? Tell me, what is she like?"

He turned his head away at the question.

She took a stool at his feet, and persisted in looking up at him. "Is it serious, Robert?" she repeated softly.

Kirke's weatherbeaten face was accustomed to no concealments—it answered for him before he spoke a word. "Don't tell your husband till I am gone," he said, with a roughness quite new in his sister's experience of him. "I know I only deserve to be laughed at—but it hurts me, for all that."

“Hurts you?” she repeated, in astonishment.

“You can’t think me half such a fool, Lizzie, as I think myself,” pursued Kirke, bitterly. “A man at my age ought to know better. I didn’t set eyes on her for as much as a minute altogether; and there I have been, hanging about the place till after nightfall, on the chance of seeing her again—skulking, I should have called it, if I had found one of my men doing what I have been doing myself. I believe I’m bewitched. She’s a mere girl, Lizzie,—I doubt if she’s out of her teens—I’m old enough to be her father. It’s all one; she stops in my mind in spite of me. I’ve had her face looking at me, through the pitch darkness, every step of the way to this house; and it’s looking at me now—as plain as I see yours, and plainer.”

He rose impatiently, and began to walk backwards and forwards in the room. His sister looked after him with surprise, as well as sympathy, expressed in her face. From his boyhood upwards, she had always been accustomed to see him master of himself. Years since, in the failing fortunes of the family, he had been their example and their support. She had heard of him, in the desperate emergencies of a life at sea, when hundreds of his fellow-creatures had looked to his steady self-possession for rescue from close-threatening death—and had not looked in vain. Never, in all her life before, had his sister seen the balance of that calm and equal mind lost, as she saw it lost now.

“How can you talk so unreasonably about your age

and yourself?" she said. "There is not a woman alive, Robert, who is good enough for you. What is her name?"

"Bygrave. Do you know it?"

"No. But I might soon make acquaintance with her. If we only had a little time before us; if I could only get to Aldborough and see her—but you are going away to-morrow; your ship sails at the end of the week."

"Thank God for that!" said Kirke, fervently.

"Are you glad to be going away?" she asked, more and more amazed at him.

"Right glad, Lizzie, for my own sake. If I ever get to my senses again, I shall find my way back to them on the deck of my ship. This girl has got between me and my thoughts already: she sha'n't go a step further, and get between me and my duty. I'm determined on that. Fool as I am, I have sense enough left not to trust myself within easy hail of Aldborough to-morrow morning. I'm good for another twenty miles of walking—and I'll begin my journey back to-night."

His sister started up, and caught him fast by the arm. "Robert!" she exclaimed; "you're not serious? You don't mean to leave us on foot, alone in the dark?"

"It's only saying good-bye, my dear, the last thing at night, instead of the first thing in the morning," he answered, with a smile. "Try and make allowances for me, Lizzie. My life has been passed at sea; and I'm not used to having my mind upset in this way.

Men ashore are used to it; men ashore can take it easy. I can't. If I stopped here, I shouldn't rest. If I waited till to-morrow, I should only be going back to have another look at her. I don't want to feel more ashamed of myself than I do already. I want to fight my way back to my duty and myself, without stopping to think twice about it. Darkness is nothing to me—I'm used to darkness. I have got the high road to walk on, and I can't lose my way. Let me go, Lizzie! The only sweetheart I have any business with, at my age, is my ship. Let me get back to her!"

His sister still kept her hold of his arm, and still pleaded with him to stay till the morning. He listened to her with perfect patience and kindness—but she never shook his determination for an instant.

"What am I to say to William?" she pleaded. "What will he think, when he comes back, and finds you gone?"

"Tell him I have taken the advice he gave us, in his sermon last Sunday. Say I have turned my back on the world, the flesh, and the devil."

"How can you talk so, Robert! And the boys too—you promised not to go without bidding the boys good-bye."

"That's true. I made my little nephews a promise; and I'll keep it." He kicked off his shoes, as he spoke, on the mat outside the door. "Light me up-stairs, Lizzie; I'll bid the two boys good-bye without waking them."

She saw the uselessness of resisting him any longer ; and, taking the candle, went before him up-stairs.

The boys — both young children — were sleeping together in the same bed. The youngest was his uncle's favourite, and was called by his uncle's name. He lay peacefully asleep, with a rough little toy ship hugged fast in his arms. Kirke's eyes softened as he stole on tiptoe to the child's side, and kissed him with the gentleness of a woman. "Poor little man!" said the sailor, tenderly. "He is as fond of his ship as I was at his age. I'll cut him out a better one when I come back. Will you give me my nephew one of these days, Lizzie, and will you let me make a sailor of him?"

"Oh, Robert, if you were only married and happy, as I am!"

"The time has gone by, my dear. I must make the best of it as I am, with my little nephew there to help me."

He left the room. His sister's tears fell fast as she followed him into the parlour. "There is something so forlorn and dreadful in your leaving us like this," she said. "Shall I go to Aldborough to-morrow, Robert, and try if I can get acquainted with her, for your sake?"

"No!" he replied. "Let her be. If it's ordered that I am to see that girl again, I *shall* see her. Leave it to the future, and you leave it right." He put on his shoes, and took up his hat and stick. "I won't over-walk myself," he said, cheerfully. "If the coach

doesn't overtake me on the road, I can wait for it where I stop to breakfast. Dry your eyes, my dear; and give me a kiss."

She was like her brother, in features and complexion; and she had a touch of her brother's spirit—she dashed away the tears, and took her leave of him bravely.

"I shall be back in a year's time," said Kirke, falling into his old sailor-like way, at the door. "I'll bring you a China shawl, Lizzie, and a chest of tea for your store-room. Don't let the boys forget me; and don't think I'm doing wrong to leave you in this way. I know I am doing right. God bless you and keep you, my dear—and your husband, and your children! Good-bye!"

He stooped, and kissed her. She ran to the door to look after him. A puff of air extinguished the candle—and the black night shut him out from her in an instant.

Three days afterwards, the first-class merchantman, *DELIVERANCE*—Kirke, commander—sailed from London for the China Sea.

CHAPTER III.

THE threatening of storm and change passed away with the night. When morning rose over Aldborough, the sun was master in the blue heaven, and the waves were rippling gaily under the summer breeze.

At an hour when no other visitors to the watering-place were yet astir, the indefatigable Wragge appeared at the door of North Shingles Villa, and directed his steps northward, with a neatly-bound copy of Joyce's *Scientific Dialogues* in his hand. Arriving at the waste ground beyond the houses, he descended to the beach, and opened his book. The interview of the past night had sharpened his perception of the difficulties to be encountered in the coming enterprise. He was now doubly determined to try the characteristic experiment at which he had hinted in his letter to Magdalen: and to concentrate on himself—in the character of a remarkably well-informed man—the entire interest and attention of the formidable Mrs. Lecount.

Having taken his dose of ready-made science (to use his own expression), the first thing in the morning, on an empty stomach, Captain Wragge joined his small family circle at breakfast-time, inflated with information

for the day. He observed that Magdalen's face showed plain signs of a sleepless night. She made no complaint: her manner was composed, and her temper perfectly under control. Mrs. Wragge—refreshed by some thirteen consecutive hours of uninterrupted repose—was in excellent spirits, and up at heel (for a wonder) with both shoes. She brought with her into the room several large sheets of tissue paper, cut crisply into mysterious and many-varying forms, which immediately provoked from her husband the short and sharp question, "What have you got there?"

"Patterns, captain," said Mrs. Wragge, in timidly conciliating tones. "I went shopping in London, and bought an Oriental Cashmere Robe. It cost a deal of money; and I'm going to try and save, by making it myself. I've got my patterns, and my dress-making directions written out as plain as print. I'll be very tidy, captain; I'll keep in my own corner, if you'll please to give me one; and whether my head Buzzes, or whether it don't, I'll sit straight at my work all the same."

"You will do your work," said the captain, sternly, "when you know who you are, who I am, and who that young lady is—not before. Show me your shoes! Good. Show me your cap! Good. Make the breakfast."

When breakfast was over, Mrs. Wragge received her orders to retire to an adjoining room, and to wait there until her husband came to release her. As soon as her back was turned, Captain Wragge at once resumed the conversation which had been suspended, by Magdalen's

own desire, on the preceding night. The questions he now put to her, all related to the subject of her visit in disguise to Noel Vanstone's house. They were the questions of a thoroughly clear-headed man—short, searching, and straight to the point. In less than half-an-hour's time, he had made himself acquainted with every incident that had happened in Vauxhall Walk.

The conclusions which the captain drew, after gaining his information, were clear and easily stated.

On the adverse side of the question, he expressed his conviction that Mrs. Lecount had certainly detected her visitor to be disguised; that she had never really left the room, though she might have opened and shut the door; and that on both the occasions, therefore, when Magdalen had been betrayed into speaking in her own voice, Mrs. Lecount had heard her. On the favourable side of the question, he was perfectly satisfied that the painted face and eyelids, the wig, and the padded cloak had so effectually concealed Magdalen's identity, that she might, in her own person, defy the house-keeper's closest scrutiny, so far as the matter of appearance was concerned. The difficulty of deceiving Mrs. Lecount's ears, as well as her eyes, was, he readily admitted, not so easily to be disposed of. But looking to the fact that Magdalen, on both the occasions when she had forgotten herself, had spoken in the heat of anger, he was of opinion that her voice had every reasonable chance of escaping detection—if she carefully avoided all outbursts of temper for the future, and spoke in those more composed and ordinary tones,

which Mrs. Lecount had not yet heard. Upon the whole, the captain was inclined to pronounce the prospect hopeful, if one serious obstacle were cleared away at the outset—that obstacle being nothing less than the presence on the scene of action of Mrs. Wragge.

To Magdalen's surprise, when the course of her narrative brought her to the story of the ghost, Captain Wragge listened with the air of a man who was more annoyed than amused by what he heard. When she had done, he plainly told her that her unlucky meeting on the stairs of the lodging-house with Mrs. Wragge was, in his opinion, the most serious of all the accidents that had happened in Vauxhall Walk.

“I can deal with the difficulty of my wife's stupidity,” he said, as I have often dealt with it before. I can hammer her new identity *into* her head, but I can't hammer the ghost *out* of it. We have no security that the woman in the grey cloak and poke bonnet may not come back to her recollection at the most critical time, and under the most awkward circumstances. In plain English, my dear girl, Mrs. Wragge is a pitfall under our feet at every step we take.”

“If we are aware of the pitfall,” said Magdalen, “we can take our measures for avoiding it. What do you propose?”

“I propose,” replied the captain, “the temporary removal of Mrs. Wragge. Speaking purely in a pecuniary point of view, I can't afford a total separation from her. You have often read of very poor people

being suddenly enriched by legacies reaching them from remote and unexpected quarters? Mrs. Wragge's case, when I married her, was one of these. An elderly female relative shared the favours of fortune, on that occasion, with my wife; and if I only keep up domestic appearances, I happen to know that Mrs. Wragge will prove a second time profitable to me, on that elderly relative's death. But for this circumstance, I should probably long since have transferred my wife to the care of society at large—in the agreeable conviction that if I didn't support her, somebody else would. Although I can't afford to take this course, I see no objection to having her comfortably boarded and lodged out of our way, for the time being—say, at a retired farm-house, in the character of a lady in infirm mental health. *You* would find the expense trifling; *I* should find the relief unutterable. What do you say? Shall I pack her up at once, and take her away by the next coach?"

"No!" replied Magdalen, firmly. "The poor creature's life is hard enough already; I won't help to make it harder. She was affectionately and truly kind to me when I was ill—and I won't allow her to be shut up among strangers while I can help it. The risk of keeping her here is only one risk more. I will face it, Captain Wragge—if you won't."

"Think twice," said the captain, gravely, "before you decide on keeping Mrs. Wragge."

"Once is enough," rejoined Magdalen. "I won't have her sent away."

“Very good,” said the captain, resignedly. “never interfere with questions of sentiment. But I have a word to say, on my own behalf. If my services are to be of any use to you, I can’t have my hands tied at starting. This is serious. I won’t trust my wife and Mrs. Lecount together. I’m afraid, if you’re not—and I make it a condition that, if Mrs. Wragge stops here, she keeps her room. If you think her health requires it, you can take her for a walk early in the morning, or late in the evening—but you must never trust her out with the servant, and never trust her out by herself. I put the matter plainly, it is too important to be trifled with. What do you say—yes, or no?”

“I say, yes,” replied Magdalen, after a moment’s consideration. “On the understanding that I am to take her out walking as you propose.”

Captain Wragge bowed, and recovered his suavity of manner. “What are our plans?” he inquired. “Shall we start our enterprise this afternoon? Are you ready for your introduction to Mrs. Lecount and her master?”

“Quite ready.”

“Good, again. We will meet them on the Parade, at their usual hour for going out—two o’clock. It is not twelve yet. I have two hours before me—just time enough to fit my wife into her new Skin. The process is absolutely necessary, to prevent her compromising us with the servant. Don’t be afraid about the results; Mrs. Wragge has had a copious selection of

assumed names hammered into her head in the course of her matrimonial career. It is merely a question of hammering hard enough—nothing more. I think we have settled everything now. Is there anything I can do before two o'clock? Have you any employment for the morning?"

"No," said Magdalen. "I shall go back to my own room, and try to rest."

"You had a disturbed night, I am afraid?" said the captain, politely opening the door for her.

"I fell asleep once or twice," she answered, carelessly. "I suppose my nerves are a little shaken. The bold black eyes of that man who stared so rudely at me yesterday evening, seemed to be looking at me again in my dreams. If we see him to-day, and if he annoys me any more, I must trouble you to speak to him. We will meet here again at two o'clock. Don't be hard with Mrs. Wragge; teach her what she must learn as tenderly as you can."

With those words she left him, and went up-stairs.

She lay down on her bed, with a heavy sigh, and tried to sleep. It was useless. The dull weariness of herself which now possessed her, was not the weariness which finds its remedy in repose. She rose again, and sat by the window, looking out listlessly over the sea.

A weaker nature than hers would not have felt the shock of Frank's desertion as she had felt it—as she was feeling it still. A weaker nature would have found refuge in indignation and comfort in tears. The passionate strength of Magdalen's love clung desperately

to the sinking wreck of its own delusion—clung, until she tore herself from it, by main force of will. All that her native pride, her keen sense of wrong could do, was to shame her from dwelling on the thoughts which still caught their breath of life from the undying devotion of the past; which still perversely ascribed Frank's heartless farewell to any cause but the inborn baseness of the man who had written it. The woman never lived yet who could cast a true love out of her heart, because the object of that love was unworthy of her. All she can do is to struggle against it in secret—to sink in the contest, if she is weak; to win her way through it, if she is strong, by a process of self-laceration, which is of all moral remedies applied to a woman's nature, the most dangerous and the most desperate; of all moral changes the change that is surest to mark her for life. Magdalen's strong nature had sustained her through the struggle; and the issue of it had left her—what she now was.

After sitting by the window for nearly an hour—her eyes looking mechanically at the view; her mind empty of all impressions, and conscious of no thoughts—she shook off the strange waking stupor that possessed her, and rose to prepare herself for the serious business of the day.

She went to the wardrobe, and took down from the pegs two bright, delicate muslin dresses, which had been made for summer wear at Combe-Raven, a year since, and which had been of too little value to be worth selling when she parted with her other possessions.

After placing these dresses side by side on the bed, she looked into the wardrobe once more. It only contained one other summer dress—the plain alpaca gown which she had worn during her memorable interview with Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount. This she left in its place ; resolving not to wear it, less from any dread that the housekeeper might recognize a pattern too quiet to be noticed, and too common to be remembered, than from the conviction that it was neither gay enough nor becoming enough for her purpose. After taking a plain white muslin scarf, a pair of light grey kid gloves, and a garden hat of Tuscan straw, from the drawers of the wardrobe, she locked it, and put the key carefully in her pocket.

Instead of at once proceeding to dress herself, she sat idly looking at the two muslin gowns ; careless which she wore, and yet inconsistently hesitating which to choose. “ What does it matter ! ” she said to herself with a reckless laugh ; “ I am equally worthless in my own estimation, whichever I put on.” She shuddered, as if the sound of her own laughter had startled her ; and abruptly caught up the dress which lay nearest to her hand. Its colours were blue and white—the shade of blue which best suited her fair complexion. She hurriedly put on the gown, without going near her looking-glass. For the first time in her life, she shrank from meeting the reflection of herself—except for a moment, when she arranged her hair under her garden-hat, leaving the glass again immediately. She drew her scarf over her shoulders, and fitted on her gloves,

with her back to the toilet-table. "Shall I paint?" she asked herself, feeling instinctively that she was turning pale. "The rouge is still left in my box. It can't make my face more false than it is already." She looked round towards the glass, and again turned away from it. "No!" she said. "I have Mrs. Lecount to face, as well as her master. No paint." After consulting her watch, she left the room, and went down stairs again. It wanted ten minutes only of two o'clock.

Captain Wragge was waiting for her in the parlour—respectable in a frock-coat, a stiff summer cravat, and a high white hat; specklessly and cheerfully rural, in a buff waistcoat, grey trousers, and gaiters to match. His collars were higher than ever, and he carried a bran-new camp-stool in his hand. Any tradesman in England who had seen him at that moment, would have trusted him on the spot.

"Charming!" said the captain, paternally surveying Magdalen when she entered the room. "So fresh and cool! A little too pale, my dear, and a great deal too serious. Otherwise perfect. Try if you can smile."

"When the time comes for smiling," said Magdalen, bitterly, "trust my dramatic training for any change of face that may be necessary. Where is Mrs. Wragge?"

"Mrs. Wragge has learnt her lesson," replied the captain, "and is rewarded by my permission to sit at work in her own room. I sanction her new fancy for dressmaking, because it is sure to absorb all her attention, and to keep her at home. There is no fear

of her finishing the Oriental Robe in a hurry—for there is no mistake in the process of making it which she is not certain to commit. She will sit incubating her gown—pardon the expression—like a hen over an addled egg. I assure you her new whim relieves me. Nothing could be more convenient under existing circumstances.”

He strutted away to the window—looked out—and beckoned to Magdalen to join him. “There they are!” he said, and pointed to the parade.

Noel Vanstone^d slowly walked by, as she looked, dressed in a complete suit of old-fashioned nankeen. It was apparently one of the days when the state of his health was at the worst. He leaned on Mrs. Lecount’s arm, and was protected from the sun by a light umbrella which she held over him. The housekeeper—dressed to perfection, as usual, in a quiet lavender-coloured summer gown, a black mantilla, an unassuming straw bonnet, and a crisp blue veil—escorted her invalid master with the tenderest attention; sometimes, directing his notice respectfully to the various objects of the sea view; sometimes, bending her head in graceful acknowledgment of the courtesy of passing strangers on the parade, who stepped aside to let the invalid pass by. She produced a visible effect among the idlers on the beach. They looked after her, with unanimous interest; and exchanged confidential nods of approval, which said as plainly as words could have expressed it:—“A very domestic person! a truly superior woman!”

Captain Wragge's parti-coloured eyes followed Mrs. Lecount with a steady, distrustful attention. "Tough work for us, *there*," he whispered in Magdalen's ear; "tougher work than you think, before we turn that woman out of her place."

"Wait," said Magdalen quietly. "Wait, and see."

She walked to the door. The captain followed her without making any further remark. "I'll wait till you're married," he thought to himself—"not a moment longer, offer me what you may."

At the house door, Magdalen addressed him again.

"We will go that way," she said, pointing southward—"then turn, and meet them as they come back."

Captain Wragge signified his approval of the arrangement, and followed Magdalen to the garden gate. As she opened it to pass through, her attention was attracted by a lady, with a nursery-maid and two little boys behind her, loitering on the path outside the garden wall. The lady started, looked eagerly, and smiled to herself, as Magdalen came out. Curiosity had got the better of Kirke's sister—and she had come to Aldborough for the express purpose of seeing Miss Bygrave.

Something in the shape of the lady's face, something in the expression of her dark eyes, reminded Magdalen of the merchant-captain, whose uncontrolled admiration had annoyed her on the previous evening. She instantly returned the stranger's scrutiny by a frowning, ungracious look. The lady coloured, paid the look back with interest, and slowly walked on.

“A hard, bold, bad girl,” thought Kirke’s sister. “What could Robert be thinking of to admire her? I am almost glad he is gone. I hope and trust he will never set eyes on Miss Bygrave again.”

“What boors the people arè here!” said Magdalen to Captain Wragge. “That woman was even ruder than the man last night. She is like him in the face. I wonder who she is?”

“I’ll find out directly,” said the captain. “We can’t be too cautious about strangers.” He at once appealed to his friends, the boatmen. They were close at hand; and Magdalen heard the questions and answers plainly.

“How are you all, this morning?” said Captain Wragge, in his easy jocular way. “And how’s the wind? Nor’-west and by west, is it? Very good. Who is that lady?”

“That’s Mrs. Strickland, sir.”

“Ay! ay! The clergyman’s wife and the captain’s sister. Where’s the captain to-day?”

“On his way to London, I should think, sir. His ship sails for China, at the end of the week.”

China! As that one word passed the man’s lips, a pang of the old sorrow struck Magdalen to the heart. Stranger as he was, she began to hate the bare mention of the merchant-captain’s name. He had troubled her dreams of the past night—and now, when she was most desperately and recklessly bent on forgetting her old home-existence, he had been indirectly the cause of recalling her mind to Frank.

“Come !” she said angrily to her companion. “What do we care about the man or his ship? Come away.”

“By all means,” said Captain Wragge. “As long as we don’t find friends of the Bygraves, what do we care about anybody?”

They walked on, southwards, for ten minutes or more—then turned and walked back again to meet Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN WRAGGE and Magdalen retraced their steps until they were again within view of North Shingles Villa, before any signs appeared of Mrs. Lecount and her master. At that point, the housekeeper's lavender-coloured dress, the umbrella, and the feeble little figure in nankeen walking under it, became visible in the distance. The captain slackened his pace immediately ; and issued his directions to Magdalen for her conduct at the coming interview, in these words :

“Don't forget your smile,” he said. “In all other respects you will do. The walk has improved your complexion, and the hat becomes you. Look Mrs. Lecount steadily in the face ; show no embarrassment when you speak ; and if Mr. Noel Vanstone pays you pointed attention, don't take too much notice of him while his housekeeper's eye is on you. Mind one thing ! I have been at Joyce's Scientific Dialogues all the morning ; and I am quite serious in meaning to give Mrs. Lecount the full benefit of my studies. If I can't contrive to divert her attention from you and her master, I won't give sixpence for our chance of success. Small-talk won't succeed with that woman ; compli-

ments won't succeed ; jokes won't succeed—ready-made science may recall the deceased Professor, and ready-made science may do. We must establish a code of signals to let you know what I am about. Observe this camp-stool. When I shift it from my left hand to my right, I am talking Joyce. When I shift it from my right hand to my left, I am talking Wragge. In the first case, don't interrupt me—I am leading up to my point. In the second case, say anything you like ; my remarks are not of the slightest consequence. Would you like a rehearsal? Are you sure you understand? Very good—take my arm, and look happy. Steady! here they are.”

The meeting took place nearly midway between Sea View Cottage and North Shingles. Captain Wragge took off his tall white hat, and opened the interview immediately on the friendliest terms.

“Good morning, Mrs. Lecount,” he said, with the frank and cheerful politeness of a naturally sociable man. “Good morning, Mr. Vanstone ; I am sorry to see you suffering to-day. Mrs. Lecount, permit me to introduce my niece—my niece, Miss Bygrave. My dear girl, this is Mr. Noel Vanstone, our neighbour at Sea View Cottage. We must positively be sociable at Aldborough, Mrs. Lecount. There is only one walk in the place (as my niece remarked to me just now, Mr. Vanstone); and on that walk we must all meet every time we go out. And why not? Are we formal people on either side? Nothing of the sort—we are just the reverse. You possess the continental facility

of manner, Mr. Vanstone—I match you, with the blunt cordiality of an old-fashioned Englishman—the ladies mingle together in harmonious variety, like flowers on the same bed—and the result is a mutual interest in making our sojourn at the sea-side agreeable to each other. Pardon my flow of spirits; pardon my feeling so cheerful and so young. The Iodine in the sea-air, Mrs. Lecount—the notorious effect of the Iodine in the sea-air!”

“You arrived yesterday, Miss Bygrave, did you not?” said the housekeeper, as soon as the captain’s deluge of language had come to an end.

She addressed those words to Magdalen with a gentle motherly interest in her youth and beauty, chastened by the deferential amiability which became her situation in Noel Vanstone’s household. Not the faintest token of suspicion or surprise betrayed itself in her face, her voice, or her manner, while she and Magdalen now looked at each other. It was plain at the outset that the true face and figure which she now saw, recalled nothing to her mind of the false face and figure which she had seen in Vauxhall Walk. The disguise had evidently been complete enough even to baffle the penetration of Mrs. Lecount.

“My aunt and I came here yesterday evening,” said Magdalen. “We found the latter part of the journey very fatiguing. I dare say you found it so too?”

She designedly made her answer longer than was necessary, for the purpose of discovering, at the earliest

opportunity, the effect which the sound of her voice produced on Mrs. Lecount.

The housekeeper's thin lips maintained their motherly smile; the housekeeper's amiable manner lost none of its modest deference—but the expression of her eyes suddenly changed, from a look of attention to a look of inquiry. Magdalen quietly said a few words more; and then waited again for results. The change spread gradually all over Mrs. Lecount's face; the motherly smile died away; and the amiable manner betrayed a slight touch of restraint. Still, no signs of positive recognition appeared; the housekeeper's expression remained what it had been from the first—an expression of inquiry, and nothing more.

“You complained of fatigue, sir, a few minutes since,” she said, dropping all further conversation with Magdalen, and addressing her master. “Will you go in-doors and rest?”

The proprietor of Sea View Cottage had hitherto confined himself to bowing, simpering, and admiring Magdalen through his half-closed eyelids. There was no mistaking the sudden flutter and agitation in his manner, and the heightened colour in his wizen little face. Even the reptile temperament of Noel Vanstone warmed under the influence of the sex: he had an undeniably appreciative eye for a handsome woman, and Magdalen's grace and beauty were not thrown away on him.

“Will you go in-doors, sir, and rest?” asked the housekeeper, repeating her question.

“Not yet, Lecount,” said her master. “I fancy I feel stronger; I fancy I can go on a little.” He turned simpering to Magdalen, and added in a lower tone, “I have found a new interest in my walk, Miss Bygrave. Don’t desert us, or you will take the interest away with you.”

He smiled and smirked in the highest approval of the ingenuity of his own compliment—from which Captain Wragge dexterously diverted the housekeeper’s attention, by ranging himself on her side of the path and speaking to her at the same moment. They all four walked on slowly. Mrs. Lecount said nothing more. She kept fast hold of her master’s arm, and looked across him at Magdalen with the dangerous expression of inquiry more marked than ever in her handsome black eyes. That look was not lost on the wary Wragge. He shifted his indicative camp-stool from the left hand to the right, and opened his scientific batteries on the spot.

“A busy scene, Mrs. Lecount,” said the captain, politely waving his camp-stool over the sea and the passing ships. “The greatness of England, ma’am—the true greatness of England. Pray observe how heavily some of those vessels are laden! I am often inclined to wonder whether the British sailor is at all aware, when he has got his cargo on board, of the Hydrostatic importance of the operation that he has performed. If I were suddenly transported to the deck of one of those ships (which Heaven forbid, for I suffer at sea); and if I said to a member of the crew,

‘Jack! you have done wonders; you have grasped the Theory of Floating Vessels’—how the gallant fellow would stare! And yet, on that theory Jack’s life depends. If he loads his vessel one-thirtieth part more than he ought, what happens? He sails past Aldborough, I grant you, in safety. He enters the Thames, I grant you again, in safety. He gets on into the fresh water, as far, let us say, as Greenwich; and—down he goes! Down, ma’am, to the bottom of the river, as a matter of scientific certainty!”

Here he paused; and left Mrs. Lecount no polite alternative but to request an explanation.

“With infinite pleasure, ma’am,” said the captain, drowning in the deepest notes of his voice the feeble treble in which Noel Vanstone paid his compliments to Magdalen. “We will start, if you please, with a first principle. All bodies whatever that float on the surface of the water, displace as much fluid as is equal in weight to the weight of the bodies. Good! We have got our first principle. What do we deduce from it? Manifestly this: That in order to keep a vessel above water, it is necessary to take care that the vessel and its cargo shall be of less weight than the weight of a quantity of water—pray follow me here!—of a quantity of water equal in bulk to that part of the vessel which it will be safe to immerse in the water. Now, ma’am, salt water is specifically thirty times heavier than fresh or river water; and a vessel in the German Ocean will not sink so deep as a vessel in the Thames. Consequently, when we load our ship with a

view to the London market, we have (Hydrostatically speaking) three alternatives. Either we load with one-thirtieth part less than we can carry at sea; or we take one-thirtieth part out at the mouth of the river; or we do neither the one nor the other, and, as I have already had the honour of remarking—down we go! Such,” said the captain, shifting the camp-stool back again from his right hand to his left, in token that Joyce was done with for the time being; “such, my dear madam, is the Theory of Floating Vessels. Permit me to add, in conclusion—you are heartily to welcome it.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Mrs. Lecount. “You have unintentionally saddened me, but the information I have received is not the less precious on that account. It is long, long ago, Mr. Bygrave, since I have heard myself addressed in the language of science. My dear husband made me his companion—my dear husband improved my mind as you have been trying to improve it. Nobody has taken pains with my intellect since. Many thanks, sir. Your kind consideration for me is not thrown away.”

She sighed with a plaintive humility; and privately opened her ears to the conversation on the other side of her.

A minute earlier, she would have heard her master expressing himself in the most flattering terms on the subject of Miss Bygrave's appearance in her sea-side costume. But Magdalen had seen Captain Wragge's signal with the camp-stool, and had at once diverted

Noel Vanstone to the topic of himself and his possessions, by a neatly-timed question about his house at Aldborough.

“I don’t wish to alarm you, Miss Bygrave,” were the first words of Noel Vanstone’s which caught Mrs. Lecount’s attention—“but there is only one safe house in Aldborough—and that house is Mine. The sea may destroy all the other houses—it can’t destroy Mine. My father took care of that; my father was a remarkable man. He had My house built on piles. I have reason to believe they are the strongest piles in England. Nothing can possibly knock them down—I don’t care what the sea does—nothing can possibly knock them down.”

“Then if the sea invades us,” said Magdalen, “we must all run for refuge to you.”

Noel Vanstone saw his way to another compliment; and, at the same moment, the wary captain saw his way to another burst of science.

“I could almost wish the invasion might happen,” murmured one of the gentlemen, “to give me the happiness of offering the refuge.”

“I could almost swear the wind had shifted again!” exclaimed the other. “Where is a man I can ask? Oh, there he is. Boatman! how’s the wind, now? Nor’-west and by west still—hey? And south-east and by south yesterday evening—ha? Is there anything more remarkable, Mrs. Lecount, than the variableness of the wind in this climate?” proceeded the captain, shifting the camp-stool to the scientific side

of him. "Is there any natural phenomenon more bewildering to the scientific inquirer? You will tell me that the electric fluid which abounds in the air is the principal cause of this variableness. You will remind me of the experiment of that illustrious philosopher who measured the velocity of a great storm by a flight of small feathers. My dear madam, I grant all your propositions——"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Mrs. Lecount; "you kindly attribute to me a knowledge that I don't possess. Propositions, I regret to say, are quite beyond me."

"Don't misunderstand me, ma'am," continued the captain, politely unconscious of the interruption. "My remarks apply to the temperate zone only. Place me on the coasts beyond the tropics—place me where the wind blows towards the shore in the daytime, and towards the sea by night—and I instantly advance towards conclusive experiments. For example, I know that the heat of the sun during the day, rarefies the air over the land, and so causes the wind. You challenge me to prove it. I escort you down the kitchen-stairs (with your kind permission); I take my largest pie-dish out of the cook's hands; I fill it with cold water. Good! that dish of cold water represents the ocean. I next provide myself with one of our most precious domestic conveniences—a hot-water plate—I fill it with hot water, and I put it in the middle of the pie-dish. Good again! the hot-water plate represents the land rarefying the air over it. Bear that in mind,

and give me a lighted candle. I hold my lighted candle over the cold water, and blow it out. The smoke immediately moves from the dish to the plate. Before you have time to express your satisfaction, I light the candle once more, and reverse the whole proceeding. I fill the pie-dish with hot water, and the plate with cold; I blow the candle out again, and the smoke moves this time from the plate to the dish. The smell is disagreeable—but the experiment is conclusive.”

He shifted the camp-stool back again, and looked at Mrs. Lecount with his ingratiating smile. “You don’t find me long-winded, ma’am—do you?” he said, in his easy, cheerful way, just as the housekeeper was privately opening her ears once more to the conversation on the other side of her.

“I am amazed, sir, by the range of your information,” replied Mrs. Lecount, observing the captain with some perplexity—but, thus far, with no distrust. She thought him eccentric, even for an Englishman, and possibly a little vain of his knowledge. But he had at least paid her the implied compliment of addressing that knowledge to herself; and she felt it the more sensibly, from having hitherto found her scientific sympathies with her deceased husband, treated with no great respect by the people with whom she came in contact. “Have you extended your inquiries, sir,” she proceeded, after a momentary hesitation, “to my late husband’s branch of science? I merely ask, Mr. Bygrave, because (though I am only a woman) I think

I might exchange ideas with you, on the subject of the reptile creation."

Captain Wragge was far too sharp to risk his ready-made science on the enemy's ground. The old militiaman shook his wary head.

"Too vast a subject, ma'am," he said, "for a smatterer like me. The life and labours of such a philosopher as your husband, Mrs. Lecount, warn men of my intellectual calibre not to measure themselves with a giant. May I inquire," proceeded the captain, softly smoothing the way for future intercourse with Sea View Cottage, "whether you possess any scientific memorials of the late Professor?"

"I possess his Tank, sir," said Mrs. Lecount, modestly casting her eyes on the ground; "and one of his Subjects—a little foreign Toad."

"His Tank!" exclaimed the captain, in tones of mournful interest. "And his Toad! Pardon my blunt way of speaking my mind, ma'am. You possess an object of public interest; and, as one of the public, I acknowledge my curiosity to see it."

Mrs. Lecount's smooth cheeks coloured with pleasure. The one assailable place in that cold and secret nature, was the place occupied by the memory of the Professor. Her pride in his scientific achievements, and her mortification at finding them but little known out of his own country, were genuine feelings. Never had Captain Wragge burnt his adulterated incense on the flimsy altar of human vanity to better purpose than he was burning it now.

“You are very good, sir,” said Mrs. Lecount. “In honouring my husband’s memory, you honour *me*. But though you kindly treat me on a footing of equality, I must not forget that I fill a domestic situation. I shall feel it a privilege to show you my relics, if you will allow me to ask my master’s permission first.”

She turned to Noel Vanstone; her perfectly sincere intention of making the proposed request, mingling—in that strange complexity of motives which is found so much oftener in a woman’s mind than in a man’s—with her jealous distrust of the impression which Magdalen had produced on her master.

“May I make a request, sir?” asked Mrs. Lecount, after waiting a moment to catch any fragments of tenderly-personal talk that might reach her, and after being again neatly baffled by Magdalen—thanks to the camp-stool. “Mr. Bygrave is one of the few persons in England who appreciate my husband’s scientific labours. He honours me by wishing to see my little world of reptiles. May I show it to him?”

“By all means, Lecount,” said Noel Vanstone, graciously. “You are an excellent creature, and I like to oblige you. Lecount’s Tank, Mr. Bygrave, is the only tank in England—Lecount’s Toad, is the oldest Toad in the world. Will you come and drink tea at seven o’clock to-night? And will you prevail on Miss Bygrave to accompany you? I want her to see my house. I don’t think she has any idea what a strong house it is. Come and survey my premises, Miss Bygrave. You shall have a stick, and rap on

the walls; you shall go upstairs and stamp on the floors—and then you shall hear what it all cost.” His eyes wrinkled up cunningly at the corners, and he slipped another tender speech into Magdalen’s ear, under cover of the all-predominating voice in which Captain Wragge thanked him for the invitation. “Come punctually at seven,” he whispered, “and pray wear that charming hat!”

Mrs. Lecount’s lips closed ominously. She set down the captain’s niece as a very serious drawback to the intellectual luxury of the captain’s society.

“You are fatiguing yourself, sir,” she said to her master. “This is one of your bad days. Let me recommend you to be careful; let me beg you to walk back.”

Having carried his point by inviting the new acquaintances to tea, Noel Vanstone proved to be unexpectedly docile. He acknowledged that he was a little fatigued, and turned back at once in obedience to the housekeeper’s advice.

“Take my arm, sir—take my arm on the other side,” said Captain Wragge, as they turned to retrace their steps. His parti-coloured eyes looked significantly at Magdalen while he spoke, and warned her not to stretch Mrs. Lecount’s endurance too far at starting. She instantly understood him; and, in spite of Noel Vanstone’s reiterated assertions that he stood in no need of the captain’s arm, placed herself at once by the housekeeper’s side. Mrs. Lecount recovered her good humour, and opened another conversation with Mag-

dalen, by making the one inquiry of all others which, under existing circumstances, was the hardest to answer.

“I presume Mrs. Bygrave is too tired, after her journey, to come out to-day?” said Mrs. Lecount. “Shall we have the pleasure of seeing her to-morrow?”

“Probably not,” replied Magdalen. “My aunt is in delicate health.”

“A complicated case, my dear madam,” added the captain; conscious that Mrs. Wragge’s personal appearance (if she happened to be seen by accident) would offer the flattest of all possible contradictions to what Magdalen had just said of her. “There is some remote nervous mischief which doesn’t express itself externally. You would think my wife the picture of health, if you looked at her—and yet, so delusive are appearances, I am obliged to forbid her all excitement. She sees no society—our medical attendant, I regret to say, absolutely prohibits it.”

“Very sad,” said Mrs. Lecount. “The poor lady must often feel lonely, sir, when you and your niece are away from her?”

“No,” replied the captain. “Mrs. Bygrave is a naturally domestic woman. When she is able to employ herself, she finds unlimited resources in her needle and thread.” Having reached this stage of the explanation—and having purposely skirted, as it were, round the confines of truth, in the event of the house-keeper’s curiosity leading her to make any private inquiries on the subject of Mrs. Wragge—the captain

wisely checked his fluent tongue from carrying him into any further details. "I have great hope from the air of this place," he remarked in conclusion. "The Iodine, as I have already observed, does wonders."

Mrs. Lecount acknowledged the virtues of Iodine in the briefest possible form of words, and withdrew into the innermost sanctuary of her own thoughts. "Some mystery here," said the housekeeper to herself. "A lady who looks the picture of health; a lady who suffers from a complicated nervous malady; and a lady whose hand is steady enough to use her needle and thread—is a living mass of contradictions I don't quite understand. Do you make a long stay at Aldborough, sir?" she added aloud; her eyes resting for a moment, in steady scrutiny, on the captain's face.

"It all depends, my dear madam, on Mrs. Bygrave. I trust we shall stay through the autumn. You are settled at Sea View Cottage, I presume, for the season?"

"You must ask my master, sir. It is for him to decide, not for me."

The answer was an unfortunate one. Noel Vanstone had been secretly annoyed by the change in the walking arrangements, which had separated him from Magdalen. He attributed that change to the meddling influence of Mrs. Lecount, and he now took the earliest opportunity of resenting it on the spot.

"I have nothing to do with our stay at Aldborough," he broke out peevishly. "You know as well as I do, Lecount, it all depends on *you*. Mrs. Lecount has a

brother in Switzerland," he went on, addressing himself to the captain—"a brother who is seriously ill. If he gets worse, she will have to go there and see him. I can't accompany her, and I can't be left in the house by myself. I shall have to break up my establishment at Aldborough, and stay with some friends. It all depends on you, Lecount—or on your brother, which comes to the same thing. If it depended on *me*," continued Mr. Noel Vanstone, looking pointedly at Magdalen across the housekeeper, "I should stay at Aldborough all through the autumn with the greatest pleasure. With the greatest pleasure," he reiterated, repeating the words with a tender look for Magdalen, and a spiteful accent for Mrs. Lecount.

Thus far, Captain Wragge had remained silent; carefully noting in his mind the promising possibilities of a separation between Mrs. Lecount and her master, which Noel Vanstone's little fretful outbreak had just disclosed to him. An ominous trembling in the housekeeper's thin lips, as her master openly exposed her family affairs before strangers, and openly set her jealousy at defiance, now warned him to interfere. If the misunderstanding were permitted to proceed to extremities, there was a chance that the invitation for that evening to Sea View Cottage might be put off. Now, as ever, equal to the occasion, Captain Wragge called his useful information, once more to the rescue. Under the learned auspices of Joyce, he plunged, for the third time, into the ocean of science, and brought up another pearl. He was still haranguing (on Pneu-

matics this time), still improving Mrs. Lecount's mind with his politest perseverance and his smoothest flow of language—when the walking party stopped at Noel Vanstone's door.

“Bless my soul, here we are at your house, sir!” said the captain, interrupting himself in the middle of one of his graphic sentences. “I won't keep you standing a moment. Not a word of apology, Mrs. Lecount, I beg and pray! I will put that curious point in Pneumatics more clearly before you on a future occasion. In the mean time, I need only repeat, that you can perform the experiment I have just mentioned, to your own entire satisfaction, with a bladder, an exhausted receiver, and a square box. At seven o'clock this evening, sir—at seven o'clock, Mrs. Lecount. We have had a remarkably pleasant walk, and a most instructive interchange of ideas. Now, my dear girl! your aunt is waiting for us.”

While Mrs. Lecount stepped aside to open the garden gate, Noel Vanstone seized his opportunity, and shot a last tender glance at Magdalen—under shelter of the umbrella, which he had taken into his own hands for that express purpose. “Don't forget,” he said, with his sweetest smile; “don't forget, when you come this evening, to wear that charming hat!” Before he could add any last words, Mrs. Lecount glided back to her place; and the sheltering umbrella changed hands again immediately.

“An excellent morning's work!” said Captain Wragge, as he and Magdalen walked on together to

North Shingles. "You and I and Joyce have all three done wonders. We have secured a friendly invitation at the first day's fishing for it."

He paused for an answer; and, receiving none, observed Magdalen more attentively than he had observed her yet. Her face had turned deadly pale again; her eyes looked out mechanically straight before her, in heedless reckless despair.

"What is the matter?" he asked, with the greatest surprise. "Are you ill?"

She made no reply; she hardly seemed to hear him.

"Are you getting alarmed about Mrs. Lecount?" he inquired next. "There is not the least reason for alarm. She may fancy she has heard something like your voice before; but your face evidently bewilders her. Keep your temper, and you keep her in the dark. Keep her in the dark; and you will put that two hundred pounds into my hands before the autumn is over."

He waited again for an answer; and again she remained silent. The captain tried for the third time, in another direction.

"Did you get any letters this morning?" he went on. "Is there bad news again from home? Any fresh difficulties with your sister?"

"Say nothing about my sister!" she broke out passionately. "Neither you nor I are fit to speak of her."

She said those words at the garden gate, and hurried into the house by herself. He followed her, and heard

the door of her own room violently shut to, violently locked and double-locked. Solacing his indignation by an oath, Captain Wragge sullenly went into one of the parlours on the ground floor to look after his wife. The room communicated with a smaller and darker room at the back of the house, by means of a quaint little door, with a window in the upper half of it. Softly approaching this door, the captain lifted the white muslin curtain which hung over the window, and looked into the inner room.

There was Mrs. Wragge, with her cap on one side, and her shoes down at heel; with a row of pins between her teeth; with the Oriental Cashmere Robe slowly slipping off the table; with her scissors suspended uncertain in one hand, and her written directions for dressmaking held doubtfully in the other—so absorbed over the invincible difficulties of her employment, as to be perfectly unconscious that she was at that moment the object of her husband's superintending eye. Under other circumstances, she would have been soon brought to a sense of her situation by the sound of his voice. But Captain Wragge was too anxious about Magdalen to waste any time on his wife, after satisfying himself that she was safe in her seclusion, and that she might be trusted to remain there.

He left the parlour, and, after a little hesitation in the passage, stole upstairs, and listened anxiously outside Magdalen's door. A dull sound of sobbing—a sound stifled in her handkerchief, or stifled in the bed-clothes—was all that caught his ear. He returned at

once to the ground floor, with some faint suspicion of the truth dawning on his mind at last.

“The devil take that sweetheart of hers!” thought the captain. “Mr. Noel Vanstone has raised the ghost of him at starting.”

CHAPTER V.

WHEN Magdalen appeared in the parlour, shortly before seven o'clock, not a trace of discomposure was visible in her manner. She looked and spoke as quietly and unconcernedly as usual.

The lowering distrust on Captain Wragge's face cleared away at the sight of her. There had been moments during the afternoon, when he had seriously doubted whether the pleasure of satisfying the grudge he owed to Noel Vanstone, and the prospect of earning the sum of two hundred pounds, would not be dearly purchased, by running the risk of discovery to which Magdalen's uncertain temper might expose him at any hour of the day. The plain proof now before him of her powers of self-control, relieved his mind of a serious anxiety. It mattered little to the captain what she suffered in the privacy of her own chamber, as long as she came out of it with a face that would bear inspection, and a voice that betrayed nothing.

On the way to Sea View Cottage, Captain Wragge expressed his intention of asking the housekeeper a few sympathizing questions on the subject of her invalid brother, in Switzerland. He was of opinion that the

critical condition of this gentleman's health might exercise an important influence on the future progress of the conspiracy. Any chance of a separation, he remarked, between the housekeeper and her master was, under existing circumstances, a chance which merited the closest investigation. "If we can only get Mrs. Lecount out of the way at the right time," whispered the captain, as he opened his host's garden gate, "our man is caught!"

¶ In a minute more, Magdalen was again under Noel Vanstone's roof; this time in the character of his own invited guest.

The proceedings of the evening were for the most part a repetition of the proceedings during the morning walk. Noel Vanstone vibrated between his admiration of Magdalen's beauty and his glorification of his own possessions. Captain Wragge's inexhaustible outbursts of information—relieved by delicately-indirect inquiries relating to Mrs. Lecount's brother—perpetually diverted the housekeeper's jealous vigilance from dwelling on the looks and language of her master. So the evening passed, until ten o'clock. By that time, the captain's ready-made science was exhausted, and the housekeeper's temper was forcing its way to the surface. Once more, Captain Wragge warned Magdalen by a look, and, in spite of Noel Vanstone's hospitable protest, wisely rose to say good-night.

"I have got my information," remarked the captain, on the way back. "Mrs. Lecount's brother lives at Zurich. He is a bachelor; he possesses a little money;

and his sister is his nearest relation. If he will only be so obliging as to break up altogether, he will save us a world of trouble with Mrs. Lecount."

It was a fine moonlight night. He looked round at Magdalen, as he said those words, to see if her intractable depression of spirits had seized on her again.

No! her variable humour had changed once more. She looked about her with a flaunting, feverish gaiety; she scoffed at the bare idea of any serious difficulty with Mrs. Lecount; she mimicked Noel Vanstone's high-pitched voice, and repeated Noel Vanstone's high-flown compliments, with a bitter enjoyment of turning him into ridicule. Instead of running into the house as before, she sauntered carelessly by her companion's side, humming little snatches of song, and kicking the loose pebbles right and left on the garden walk. Captain Wragge hailed the change in her as the best of good omens. He thought he saw plain signs that the family spirit was at last coming back again.

"Well," he said, as he lit her bedroom candle for her, "when we all meet on the parade to-morrow, we shall see, as our nautical friends say, how the land lies. One thing I can tell you, my dear girl—I have used my eyes to very little purpose, if there is not a storm brewing to-night in Mr. Noel Vanstone's domestic atmosphere."

The captain's habitual penetration had not misled him. As soon as the door of Sea View Cottage was closed on the parting guests, Mrs. Lecount made an

effort to assert the authority which Magdalen's influence was threatening already.

She employed every artifice of which she was mistress to ascertain Magdalen's true position in Noel Vanstone's estimation. She tried again and again to lure him into an unconscious confession of the pleasure which he felt already in the society of the beautiful Miss Bygrave; she twined herself in and out of every weakness in his character, as the frogs and efts twined themselves in and out of the rock-work of her Aquarium. But she made one serious mistake which very clever people in their intercourse with their intellectual inferiors are almost universally apt to commit—she trusted implicitly to the folly of a fool. She forgot that one of the lowest of human qualities—cunning—is exactly the capacity which is often most largely developed in the lowest of intellectual natures. If she had been honestly angry with her master she would probably have frightened him. If she had opened her mind plainly to his view, she would have astonished him by presenting a chain of ideas to his limited perceptions, which they were not strong enough to grasp; his curiosity would have led him to ask for an explanation; and by practising on that curiosity, she might have had him at her mercy. As it was, she set her cunning against his—and the fool proved a match for her. Noel Vanstone, to whom all large-minded motives under heaven were inscrutable mysteries, saw the small-minded motive at the bottom of his house-keeper's conduct, with as instantaneous a penetration as

if he had been a man of the highest ability. Mrs. Lecount left him for the night, foiled, and knowing she was foiled—left him, with the tigerish side of her uppermost, and a low-lived longing in her elegant fingernails to set them in her master's face.

She was not a woman to be beaten by one defeat or by a hundred. She was positively determined to think, and think again, until she had found a means of checking the growing intimacy with the Bygraves at once and for ever. In the solitude of her own room, she recovered her composure, and set herself, for the first time, to review the conclusions which she had gathered from the events of the day.

There was something vaguely familiar to her in the voice of this Miss Bygrave; and, at the same time, in unaccountable contradiction, something strange to her as well. The face and figure of the young lady were entirely new to her. It was a striking face, and a striking figure; and if she had seen either, at any former period, she would certainly have remembered it. Miss Bygrave was unquestionably a stranger; and yet——

She had got no farther than this during the day; she could get no farther now: the chain of thought broke. Her mind took up the fragments, and formed another chain which attached itself to the lady who was kept in seclusion—to the aunt, who looked well, and yet was nervous; who was nervous, and yet able to ply her needle and thread. An incomprehensible resemblance to some unremembered voice, in the niece; an

unintelligible malady which kept the aunt secluded from public view; an extraordinary range of scientific cultivation in the uncle, associated with a coarseness and audacity of manner which by no means suggested the idea of a man engaged in studious pursuits—were the members of this small family of three, what they seemed on the surface of them?

With that question on her mind, she went to bed.

As soon as the candle was out, the darkness seemed to communicate some inexplicable perversity to her thoughts. They wandered back from present things to past, in spite of her. They brought her old master back to life again; they revived forgotten sayings and doings in the English circle at Zurich; they veered away to the old man's death-bed at Brighton; they moved from Brighton to London; they entered the bare, comfortless room at Vauxhall Walk; they set the Aquarium back in its place on the kitchen table, and put the false Miss Garth in the chair by the side of it, shading her inflamed eyes from the light; they placed the anonymous letter, the letter which glanced darkly at a conspiracy, in her hand again, and brought her with it into her master's presence; they recalled the discussion about filling in the blank space in the advertisement, and the quarrel that followed, when she told Noel Vanstone that the sum he had offered was preposterously small; they revived an old doubt which had not troubled her for weeks past—a doubt whether the threatened conspiracy had evaporated in mere words, or whether she and her master were likely to

hear of it again. At this point her thoughts broke off once more, and there was a momentary blank. The next instant she started up in bed; her heart beating violently, her head whirling as if she had lost her senses. With electric suddenness, her mind pieced together its scattered multitude of thoughts, and put them before her plainly under one intelligible form. In the all-mastering agitation of the moment, she clapped her hands together, and cried out suddenly in the darkness:

“Miss Vanstone again!!!”

She got out of bed and kindled the light once more. Steady as her nerves were, the shock of her own suspicion had shaken them. Her firm hand trembled as she opened her dressing-case, and took from it a little bottle of sal-volatile. In spite of her smooth cheeks and her well-preserved hair, she looked every year of her age, as she mixed the spirit with water, greedily drank it, and, wrapping her dressing-gown round her, sat down on the bedside to get possession again of her calmer self.

She was quite incapable of tracing the mental process which had led her to discovery. She could not get sufficiently far from herself to see that her half-formed conclusions on the subject of the Bygraves, had ended in making that family objects of suspicion to her; that the association of ideas had thereupon carried her mind back to that other object of suspicion which was represented by the conspiracy against her master; and that the two ideas of those two separate subjects of

distrust, coming suddenly in contact, had struck the light. She was not able to reason back in this way from the effect to the cause. She could only feel that the suspicion had become more than a suspicion already: conviction itself could not have been more firmly rooted in her mind.

Looking back at Magdalen by the new light now thrown on her, Mrs. Lecount would fain have persuaded herself that she recognized some traces left of the false Miss Garth's face and figure, in the graceful and beautiful girl who had sat at her master's table hardly an hour since—that she found resemblances now, which she had never thought of before, between the angry voice she had heard in Vauxhall Walk, and the smooth well-bred tones which still hung on her ears, after the evening's experience down stairs. She would fain have persuaded herself that she had reached these results with no undue straining of the truth as she really knew it; but the effort was in vain.

Mrs. Lecount was not a woman to waste time and thought in trying to impose on herself. She accepted the inevitable conclusion that the guesswork of a moment had led her to discovery. And, more than that, she recognized the plain truth—unwelcome as it was—that the conviction now fixed in her own mind was, thus far, unsupported by a single fragment of producible evidence to justify it to the minds of others.

Under these circumstances, what was the safe course to take with her master?

If she candidly told him, when they met the next morning, what had passed through her mind that night, her knowledge of Noel Vanstone warned her that one of two results would certainly happen. Either he would be angry and disputatious; would ask for proofs; and, finding none forthcoming, would accuse her of alarming him without a cause, to serve her own jealous end of keeping Magdalen out of the house—or, he would be seriously startled, would clamour for the protection of the law, and would warn the Bygraves to stand on their defence at the outset. If Magdalen only had been concerned in the plot, this latter consequence would have assumed no great importance in the housekeeper's mind. But seeing the deception as she now saw it, she was far too clever a woman to fail in estimating the captain's inexhaustible fertility of resource at its true value. "If I can't meet this impudent villain with plain proofs to help me," thought Mrs. Lecount, "I may open my master's eyes to-morrow morning, and Mr. Bygrave will shut them up again before night. The rascal is playing with all his own cards under the table; and he will win the game to a certainty if he sees my hand at starting."

This policy of waiting was so manifestly the wise policy—the wily Mr. Bygrave was so sure to have provided himself, in case of emergency, with evidence to prove the identity which he and his niece had assumed for their purpose—that Mrs. Lecount at once decided to keep her own counsel the next morning, and to pause before attacking the conspiracy, until she

could produce unanswerable facts to help her. Her master's acquaintance with the Bygraves was only an acquaintance of one day's standing. There was no fear of its developing into a dangerous intimacy if she merely allowed it to continue for a few days more, and if she permanently checked it, at the latest, in a week's time.

In that period, what measures could she take to remove the obstacles which now stood in her way, and to provide herself with the weapons which she now wanted?

Reflection showed her three different chances in her favour—three different ways of arriving at the necessary discovery.

The first chance was to cultivate friendly terms with Magdalen,—and then, taking her unawares, to entrap her into betraying herself in Noel Vanstone's presence. The second chance was to write to the elder Miss Vanstone, and to ask (with some alarming reason for putting the question) for information on the subject of her younger sister's whereabouts, and of any peculiarities in her personal appearance, which might enable a stranger to identify her. The third chance was to penetrate the mystery of Mrs. Bygrave's seclusion, and to ascertain at a personal interview whether the invalid lady's real complaint might not possibly be a defective capacity for keeping her husband's secrets. Resolving to try all three chances, in the order in which they are here enumerated, and to set her snares for Magdalen on the day that was now already at hand, Mrs. Lecount at

last took off her dressing-gown and allowed her weaker nature to plead with her for a little sleep.

The dawn was breaking over the cold grey sea, as she lay down in her bed again. The last idea in her mind, before she fell asleep, was characteristic of the woman—it was an idea that threatened the captain. “He has trifled with the sacred memory of my husband,” thought the Professor’s widow. “On my life and honour, I will make him pay for it!”

Early the next morning, Magdalen began the day—according to her agreement with the captain—by taking Mrs. Wragge out for a little exercise, at an hour when there was no fear of her attracting the public attention. She pleaded hard to be left at home; having the Oriental Cashmere Robe still on her mind, and feeling it necessary to read her directions for dressmaking, for the hundredth time at least, before (to use her own expression) she could “screw up her courage to put the scissors into the stuff.” But her companion would take no denial, and she was forced to go out. The one guileless purpose of the life which Magdalen now led, was the resolution that poor Mrs. Wragge should not be made a prisoner on her account—and to that resolution she mechanically clung, as the last token left her by which she knew her better self.

They returned later than usual to breakfast. While Mrs. Wragge was up-stairs, straightening herself from head to foot to meet the morning inspection of her husband’s orderly eye, and while Magdalen and the

captain were waiting for her in the parlour, the servant came in with a note from Sea View Cottage. The messenger was waiting for an answer, and the note was addressed to Captain Wragge.

The captain opened the note, and read these lines :

“DEAR SIR,

“Mr. Noel Vanstone desires me to write and tell you that he proposes enjoying this fine day by taking a long drive to a place on the coast here, called Dunwich. He is anxious to know if you will share the expense of a carriage, and give him the pleasure of your company, and Miss Bygrave’s company, on this excursion. I am kindly permitted to be one of the party; and if I may say so without impropriety, I would venture to add that I shall feel as much pleasure as my master if you and your young lady will consent to join us. We propose leaving Aldborough punctually at eleven o’clock.

“Believe me, dear sir,

“Your humble servant,

“VIRGINIE LECOUNT.”

“Who is the letter from?” asked Magdalen, noticing a change in Captain Wragge’s face, as he read it. “What do they want with us at Sea View Cottage?”

“Pardon me,” said the captain, gravely, “this requires consideration. Let me have a minute or two to think.”

He took a few turns up and down the room—then

suddenly stepped aside to a table in a corner, on which his writing materials were placed. "I was not born yesterday, ma'am!" said the captain, speaking jocosely to himself. He winked his brown eye, took up his pen, and wrote the answer.

"Can you speak now?" inquired Magdalen, when the servant had left the room. "What does that letter say, and how have you answered it?"

The captain placed the letter in her hand. "I have accepted the invitation," he replied, quietly.

Magdalen read the letter. "Hidden enmity yesterday," she said, "and open friendship to-day. What does it mean?"

"It means," said Captain Wragge, "that Mrs. Lecount is even sharper than I thought her. She has found you out."

"Impossible," cried Magdalen. "Quite impossible in the time."

"I can't say *how* she has found you out," proceeded the captain, with perfect composure. "She may know more of your voice than we supposed she knew. Or, she may have thought us, on reflection, rather a suspicious family; and anything suspicious, in which a woman was concerned, may have taken her mind back to that morning call of yours in Vauxhall Walk. Whichever way it may be, the meaning of this sudden change is clear enough. She has found you out; and she wants to put her discovery to the proof, by slipping in an awkward question or two, under cover of a little friendly talk. My experience of humanity has been a

varied one ; and Mrs. Lecount is not the first sharp practitioner in petticoats whom I have had to deal with. All the world's a stage, my dear girl—and one of the scenes on our little stage is shut in from this moment.”

With those words, he took his copy of Joyce's Scientific Dialogues out of his pocket. “You're done with already, my friend!” said the captain, giving his useful information a farewell smack with his hand, and locking it up in the cupboard. “Such is human popularity!” continued the indomitable vagabond, putting the key cheerfully in his pocket. “Yesterday, Joyce was my all-in-all. To-day, I don't care that for him!” He snapped his fingers and sat down to breakfast.

“I don't understand you,” said Magdalen, looking at him angrily. “Are you leaving me to my own resources for the future?”

“My dear girl!” cried Captain Wragge, “can't you accustom yourself to my dash of humour yet? I have done with my ready-made science, simply because I am quite sure that Mrs. Lecount has done believing in me. Haven't I accepted the invitation to Dunwich? Make your mind easy. The help I have given you already, counts for nothing compared with the help I am going to give you now. My honour is concerned in bowling out Mrs. Lecount. This last move of hers has made it a personal matter between us. *The woman actually thinks she can take me in!!!*” cried the captain, striking his knife-handle on the table in a

transport of virtuous indignation. "By Heavens I never was so insulted before in my life! Draw your hair in to the table, my dear; and give me half a minute's attention to what I have to say next."

Magdalen obeyed him. Captain Wragge cautiously lowered his voice before he went on.

"I have told you all along," he said, "the one thing needful is never to let Mrs. Lecount catch you with your wits wool-gathering. I say the same after what has happened this morning. Let her suspect you! I defy her to find a fragment of foundation for her suspicions, unless we help her. We shall see to-day if she has been foolish enough to betray herself to her master before she has any facts to support her. I doubt it. If she has told him, we will rain down proofs of our identity with the Bygraves on his feeble little head, till it absolutely aches with conviction. You have two things to do on this excursion. First, to distrust every word Mrs. Lecount says to you. Secondly, to exert all your fascinations, and make sure of Mr. Noel Vanstone, dating from to-day. I will give you the opportunity, when we leave the carriage, and take our walk at Dunwich. Wear your hat, wear your smile; do your figure justice, lace tight; put on your neatest boots and brightest gloves; tie the miserable little wretch to your apron-string—tie him fast; and leave the whole management of the matter after that, to me. Steady! here is Mrs. Wragge: we must be doubly careful in looking after her now. Show me your cap, Mrs. Wragge! show me your shoes! What

do I see on your apron? A spot? I won't have spots! Take it off after breakfast, and put on another. Pull your chair to the middle of the table—more to the left—more still. Make the breakfast."

At a quarter before eleven, Mrs. Wragge (with her own entire concurrence) was dismissed to the back room, to bewilder herself over the science of dress-making for the rest of the day. Punctually as the clock struck the hour, Mrs. Lecount and her master drove up to the gate of North Shingles, and found Magdalen and Captain Wragge waiting for them in the garden.

On the way to Dunwich nothing occurred to disturb the enjoyment of the drive. Noel Vanstone was in excellent health and high good humour. Lecount had apologized for the little misunderstanding of the previous night; Lecount had petitioned for the excursion as a treat to herself. He thought of these concessions, and looked at Magdalen, and smirked and simpered without intermission. Mrs. Lecount acted her part to perfection. She was motherly with Magdalen, and tenderly attentive to Noel Vanstone. She was deeply interested in Captain Wragge's conversation, and meekly disappointed to find it turn on general subjects, to the exclusion of science. Not a word or look escaped her, which hinted in the remotest degree at her real purpose. She was dressed with her customary elegance and propriety; and she was the only one of the party, on that sultry summer's day, who was perfectly cool in the hottest part of the journey.

As they left the carriage on their arrival at Dunwich, the captain seized a moment, when Mrs. Lecount's eye was off him, and fortified Magdalen by a last warning word.

“'Ware the cat!” he whispered. “She will show her claws on the way back.”

They left the village and walked to the ruins of a convent near at hand—the last relic of the once-populous city of Dunwich which has survived the destruction of the place, centuries since, by the all-devouring sea. After looking at the ruins, they sought the shade of a little wood, between the village and the low sand-hills which overlook the German Ocean. Here, Captain Wragge manœuvred so as to let Magdalen and Noel Vanstone advance some distance in front of Mrs. Lecount and himself—took the wrong path—and immediately lost his way with the most consummate dexterity. After a few minutes' wandering (in the wrong direction), he reached an open space near the sea; and politely opening his camp-stool for the housekeeper's accommodation, proposed waiting where they were, until the missing members of the party came that way and discovered them.

Mrs. Lecount accepted the proposal. She was perfectly well aware that her escort had lost himself on purpose; but that discovery exercised no disturbing influence on the smooth amiability of her manner. Her day of reckoning with the captain had not come yet—she merely added the new item to her list, and

availed herself of the camp-stool. Captain Wragge stretched himself in a romantic attitude at her feet; and the two determined enemies (grouped like two lovers in a picture) fell into as easy and pleasant a conversation, as if they had been friends of twenty years' standing.

"I know you, ma'am!" thought the captain, while Mrs. Lecount was talking to him. "You would like to catch me tripping in my ready-made science; and you wouldn't object to drown me in the Professor's Tank!"

"You villain with the brown eye and the green!" thought Mrs. Lecount, as the captain caught the ball of conversation in his turn; "thick as your skin is, I'll sting you through it yet!"

In this frame of mind towards each other, they talked fluently on general subjects, on public affairs, on local scenery, on society in England and society in Switzerland, on health, climate, books, marriage, and money—talked, without a moment's pause, without a single misunderstanding on either side, for nearly an hour, before Magdalen and Noel Vanstone strayed that way, and made the party of four complete again.

When they reached the inn at which the carriage was waiting for them, Captain Wragge left Mrs. Lecount in undisturbed possession of her master, and signed to Magdalen to drop back for a moment and speak to him.

"Well?" asked the captain in a whisper; "is he fast to your apron-string?"

She shuddered from head to foot, as she answered.

“He has kissed my hand,” she said. “Does that tell you enough? Don’t let him sit next me on the way home! I have borne all I can bear—spare me for the rest of the day.”

“I’ll put you on the front seat of the carriage,” replied the captain, “side by side with me.”

On the journey back, Mrs. Lecount verified Captain Wragge’s prediction. She showed her claws.

The time could not have been better chosen; the circumstances could hardly have favoured her more. Magdalen’s spirits were depressed: she was weary in body and mind; and she sat exactly opposite the housekeeper—who had been compelled, by the new arrangement, to occupy the seat of honour next her master. With every facility for observing the slightest changes that passed over Magdalen’s face, Mrs. Lecount tried her first experiment by leading the conversation to the subject of London, and to the relative advantages offered to residents by the various quarters of the metropolis on both sides of the river. The ever-ready Wragge penetrated her intention sooner than she had anticipated, and interposed immediately. “You’re coming to Vauxhall Walk, ma’am,” thought the captain; “I’ll get there before you.”

He entered at once into a purely fictitious description of the various quarters of London in which he had himself resided; and, adroitly mentioning Vauxhall Walk as one of them, saved Magdalen from the sudden question relating to that very locality, with which Mrs. Lecount had proposed startling her to

begin with. From his residences, he passed smoothly to himself; and poured his whole family history (in the character of Mr. Bygrave) into the housekeeper's ears—not forgetting his brother's grave in Honduras, with the monument by the self-taught negro artist; and his brother's hugely corpulent widow, on the ground floor of the boarding-house at Cheltenham. As a means of giving Magdalen time to compose herself, this outburst of autobiographical information attained its object, but it answered no other purpose. Mrs. Lecount listened, without being imposed on by a single word the captain said to her. He merely confirmed her conviction of the hopelessness of taking Noel Vanstone into her confidence, before she had facts to help her against Captain Wragge's otherwise unassailable position in the identity which he had assumed. She quietly waited until he had done, and then returned to the charge.

“It is a coincidence that your uncle should once have resided in Vauxhall Walk,” she said, addressing herself to Magdalen. “Mr. Noel has a house in the same place; and we lived there before we came to Aldborough. May I inquire, Miss Bygrave, whether you know anything of a lady named Miss Garth?”

This time, she put the question before the captain could interfere. Magdalen ought to have been prepared for it by what had already passed in her presence—but her nerves had been shaken by the earlier events of the day; and she could only answer the question in the negative, after an instant's preliminary pause to control herself. Her hesitation was of too

momentary a nature to attract the attention of any unsuspecting person. But it lasted long enough to confirm Mrs. Lecount's private convictions, and to encourage her to advance a little further.

"I only asked," she continued, steadily fixing her eyes on Magdalen, steadily disregarding the efforts which Captain Wragge made to join in the conversation, "because Miss Garth is a stranger to me; and I am curious to find out what I can about her. The day before we left town, Miss Bygrave, a person who presented herself under the name I have mentioned, paid us a visit under very extraordinary circumstances."

With a smooth, ingratiating manner; with a refinement of contempt which was little less than devilish in its ingenious assumption of the language of pity, she now boldly described Magdalen's appearance in disguise, in Magdalen's own presence. She slightly referred to the master and mistress of Combe-Raven, as persons who had always annoyed the elder and more respectable branch of the family; she mourned over the children as following their parents' example, and attempting to take a mercenary advantage of Mr. Noel Vanstone, under the protection of a respectable person's character and a respectable person's name. Cleverly including her master in the conversation, so as to prevent the captain from effecting a diversion in that quarter; sparing no petty aggravation; striking at every tender place which the tongue of a spiteful woman can wound—she would, beyond all doubt, have carried her point, and tortured Magdalen into openly

betraying herself, if Captain Wragge had not checked her in full career, by a loud exclamation of alarm, and a sudden clutch at Magdalen's wrist.

"Ten thousand pardons, my dear madam!" cried the captain. "I see in my niece's face, I feel in my niece's pulse, that one of her violent neuralgic attacks has come on again. My dear girl, why hesitate among friends to confess that you are in pain? What mistimed politeness! Her face shows she is suffering—doesn't it, Mrs. Lecount? Darting pains, Mr. Vanstone, darting pains on the left side of the head. Pull down your veil, my dear, and lean on me. Our friends will excuse you; our excellent friends will excuse you, for the rest of the day."

Before Mrs. Lecount could throw an instant's doubt on the genuineness of the neuralgic attack, her master's fidgety sympathy declared itself, exactly as the captain had anticipated, in the most active manifestations. He stopped the carriage, and insisted on an immediate change in the arrangement of the places—the comfortable back seat for Miss Bygrave and her uncle; the front seat for Lecount and himself. Had Lecount got her smelling-bottle? Excellent creature! let her give it directly to Miss Bygrave, and let the coachman drive carefully. If the coachman shook Miss Bygrave he should not have a halfpenny for himself. Mesmerism was frequently useful in these cases. Mr. Noel Vanstone's father had been the most powerful mesmerist in Europe; and Mr. Noel Vanstone was his father's son. Might he mesmerize? Might he order

that infernal coachman to draw up in a shady place adapted for the purpose? Would medical help be preferred? Could medical help be found any nearer than Aldborough? That ass of a coachman didn't know. Stop every respectable man who passed in a gig, and ask him if he was a doctor! So Mr. Noel Vanstone ran on—with brief intervals for breathing-time—in a continually-ascending scale of sympathy and self-importance, throughout the drive home.

Mrs. Lecount accepted her defeat, without uttering a word. From the moment when Captain Wragge interrupted her, her thin lips closed, and opened no more for the remainder of the journey. The warmest expressions of her master's anxiety for the suffering young lady, provoked from her no outward manifestations of anger. She took as little notice of him as possible. She paid no attention whatever to the captain, whose exasperating consideration for his vanquished enemy, made him more polite to her than ever. The nearer and the nearer they got to Aldborough, the more and more fixedly Mrs. Lecount's hard black eyes looked at Magdalen reclining on the opposite seat, with her eyes closed and her veil down.

It was only when the carriage stopped at North Shingles, and when Captain Wragge was handing Magdalen out, that the housekeeper at last condescended to notice him. As he smiled and took off his hat at the carriage-door, the strong restraint she had laid on herself suddenly gave way; and she flashed one look at him, which scorched up the captain's polite-

ness on the spot. He turned at once, with a hasty acknowledgment of Noel Vanstone's last sympathetic inquiries, and took Magdalen into the house.

"I told you she would show her claws," he said. "It is not my fault that she scratched you before I could stop her. She hasn't hurt you, has she?"

"She has hurt me, to some purpose," said Magdalen—"she has given me the courage to go on. Say what must be done, to-morrow, and trust me to do it." She sighed heavily as she said those words, and went up to her room.

Captain Wragge walked meditatively into the parlour, and sat down to consider. He felt by no means so certain as he could have wished, of the next proceeding on the part of the enemy after the defeat of that day. The housekeeper's farewell look had plainly informed him that she was not at the end of her resources yet; and the old militiaman felt the full importance of preparing himself in good time to meet the next step which she took in advance. He lit a cigar, and bent his wary mind on the dangers of the future.

While Captain Wragge was considering in the parlour at North Shingles, Mrs. Lecount was meditating in her bedroom at Sea View. Her exasperation at the failure of her first attempt to expose the conspiracy, had not blinded her to the instant necessity of making a second effort, before Noel Vanstone's growing infatuation got beyond her control. The snare set for Magdalen having failed, the chance of entrapping Magdalen's sister was the next chance to try. Mrs.

Lecount ordered a cup of tea ; opened her writing-case ; and began the rough draught of a letter to be sent to Miss Vanstone the elder by the morrow's post.

So the day's skirmish ended. The heat of the battle was yet to come.

CHAPTER VI.

ALL human penetration has its limits. Accurately as Captain Wragge had seen his way hitherto, even his sharp insight was now at fault. He finished his cigar with the mortifying conviction that he was totally unprepared for Mrs. Lecount's next proceeding.

In this emergency, his experience warned him that there was one safe course, and one only, which he could take. He resolved to try the confusing effect on the housekeeper of a complete change of tactics, before she had time to press her advantage, and attack him in the dark. With this view he sent the servant upstairs, to request that Miss Bygrave would come down and speak to him.

“I hope I don't disturb you,” said the captain, when Magdalen entered the room. “Allow me to apologize for the smell of tobacco, and to say two words on the subject of our next proceedings. To put it with my customary frankness, Mrs. Lecount puzzles me, and I propose to return the compliment by puzzling her. The course of action which I have to suggest is a very simple one. I have had the honour of giving you a severe neuralgic attack already, and I beg your per-

mission (when Mr. Noel Vanstone sends to inquire to-morrow morning) to take the further liberty of laying you up altogether. Question from Sea View Cottage: 'How is Miss Bygrave this morning?' Answer from North Shingles: 'Much worse: Miss Bygrave is confined to her room.' Question repeated every day, say for a fortnight: 'How is Miss Bygrave?' Answer repeated, if necessary, for the same time: 'No better.' Can you bear the imprisonment? I see no objection to your getting a breath of fresh air the first thing in the morning, or the last thing at night. But for the whole of the day, there is no disguising it, you must put yourself in the same category with Mrs. Wragge—you must keep your room."

"What is your object in wishing me to do this?" inquired Magdalen.

"My object is twofold," replied the captain. "I blush for my own stupidity; but the fact is I can't see my way plainly to Mrs. Lecount's next move. All I feel sure of is, that she means to make another attempt at opening her master's eyes to the truth. Whatever means she may employ to discover your identity, personal communication with you, *must* be necessary to the accomplishment of her object. Very good. If I stop that communication, I put an obstacle in her way at starting—or, as we say at cards, I force her hand. Do you see the point?"

Magdalen saw it plainly. The captain went on.

"My second reason for shutting you up," he said, "refers entirely to Mrs. Lecount's master. The

growth of love, my dear girl, is, in one respect, unlike all other growths—it flourishes under adverse circumstances. Our first course of action is to make Mr. Noel Vanstone feel the charm of your society. Our next, is to drive him distracted by the loss of it. I should have proposed a few more meetings, with a view to furthering this end, but for our present critical position towards Mrs. Lecount. As it is, we must trust to the effect you produced yesterday, and try the experiment of a sudden separation rather sooner than I could have otherwise wished. I shall see Mr. Noel Vanstone, though you don't—and if there *is* a raw place established anywhere about the region of that gentleman's heart, trust me to hit him on it! You are now in full possession of my views. Take your time to consider, and give me your answer—Yes or No.”

“Any change is for the better,” said Magdalen, “which keeps me out of the company of Mrs. Lecount and her master! Let it be as you wish.”

She had hitherto answered faintly and wearily; but she spoke those last words with a heightened tone, and a rising colour—signs which warned Captain Wragge not to press her farther.

“Very good,” said the captain. “As usual we understand each other. I see you are tired; and I won't detain you any longer.”

He rose to open the door, stopped half-way to it, and came back again. “Leave me to arrange matters with the servant downstairs,” he continued. “You can't absolutely keep your bed; and we must

purchase the girl's discretion when she answers the door—without taking her into our confidence, of course. I will make her understand that she is to say you are ill, just as she might say you are not at home, as a way of keeping unwelcome acquaintances out of the house. Allow me to open the door for you.—I beg your pardon, you are going into Mrs. Wragge's work-room, instead of going to your own."

"I know I am," said Magdalen. "I wish to remove Mrs. Wragge from the miserable room she is in now, and to take her upstairs with me."

"For the evening?"

"For the whole fortnight."

Captain Wragge followed her into the dining-room and wisely closed the door before he spoke again.

"Do you seriously mean to inflict my wife's society on yourself, for a fortnight?" he asked, in great surprise.

"Your wife is the only innocent creature in this guilty house," she burst out vehemently. "I must and will have her with me!"

"Pray don't agitate yourself," said the captain. "Take Mrs. Wragge by all means. I don't want her." Having resigned the partner of his existence in those terms, he discreetly returned to the parlour. "The weakness of the sex!" thought the captain, tapping his sagacious head. "Lay a strain on the female intellect—and the female temper gives way directly."

The strain, to which the captain alluded, was not

confined that evening, to the female intellect at North Shingles: it extended to the female intellect at Sea View. For nearly two hours, Mrs. Lecount sat at her desk, writing, correcting, and writing again, before she could produce a letter to Miss Vanstone the elder, which exactly accomplished the object she wanted to attain. At last, the rough draft was completed to her satisfaction; and she made a fair copy of it, forthwith, to be posted the next day.

Her letter thus produced, was a masterpiece of ingenuity. After the first preliminary sentences, the housekeeper plainly informed Norah of the appearance of the visitor in disguise at Vauxhall Walk; of the conversation which passed at the interview; and of her own suspicion that the person claiming to be Miss Garth was, in all probability, the younger Miss Vanstone herself. Having told the truth, thus far, Mrs. Lecount next proceeded to say, that her master was in possession of evidence which would justify him in putting the law in force; that he knew the conspiracy with which he was threatened to be then in process of direction against him at Aldborough; and that he only hesitated to protect himself, in deference to family considerations, and in the hope that the elder Miss Vanstone might so influence her sister, as to render it unnecessary to proceed to extremities.

Under these circumstances (the letter continued) it was plainly necessary that the disguised visitor to Vauxhall Walk should be properly identified—for if Mrs. Lecount's guess proved to be wrong, and if the person

turned out to be a stranger, Mr. Noel Vanstone was positively resolved to prosecute in his own defence. Events at Aldborough, on which it was not necessary to dwell, would enable Mrs. Lecount in a few days to gain sight of the suspected person in her own character. But as the housekeeper was entirely unacquainted with the younger Miss Vanstone, it was obviously desirable that some better informed person, should, in this particular, take the matter in hand. If the elder Miss Vanstone happened to be at liberty to come to Aldborough herself, would she kindly write and say so?—and Mrs. Lecount would write back again to appoint a day. If, on the other hand, Miss Vanstone was prevented from taking the journey, Mrs. Lecount suggested that her reply should contain the fullest description of her sister's personal appearance—should mention any little peculiarities which might exist in the way of marks on her face or her hands—and should state (in case she had written lately) what the address was in her last letter, and failing that, what the post-mark was on the envelope. With this information to help her, Mrs. Lecount would, in the interest of the misguided young lady herself, accept the responsibility of privately identifying her; and would write back immediately to acquaint the elder Miss Vanstone with the result.

The difficulty of sending this letter to the right address gave Mrs. Lecount very little trouble. Remembering the name of the lawyer who had pleaded the cause of the two sisters in Michael Vanstone's time, she directed

ner letter to "Miss Vanstone, care of — Pendril, Esquire, London." This she enclosed in a second envelope, addressed to Mr. Noel Vanstone's solicitor, with a line inside, requesting that gentleman to send it at once to the office of Mr. Pendril.

"Now," thought Mrs. Lecount, as she locked the letter up in her desk, preparatory to posting it the next day, with her own hand; "now I have got her!"

The next morning, the servant from Sea View came, with her master's compliments, to make inquiries after Miss Bygrave's health. Captain Wragge's bulletin was duly announced—Miss Bygrave was so ill, as to be confined to her room.

On the reception of this intelligence, Noel Vanstone's anxiety led him to call at North Shingles himself, when he went out for his afternoon walk. Miss Bygrave was no better. He inquired if he could see Mr. Bygrave. The worthy captain was prepared to meet this emergency. He thought a little irritating suspense would do Noel Vanstone no harm; and he had carefully charged the servant, in case of necessity, with her answer:—"Mr. Bygrave begged to be excused; he was not able to see any one."

On the second day, inquiries were made as before, by message in the morning, and by Noel Vanstone himself in the afternoon. The morning answer (relating to Magdalen) was, "a shade better." The afternoon answer (relating to Captain Wragge) was, "Mr. Bygrave has just gone out." That evening, Noel Van-

stone's temper was very uncertain; and Mrs. Lecount's patience and tact were sorely tried in the effort to avoid offending him.

On the third morning, the report of the suffering young lady was less favourable—"Miss Bygrave was still very poorly, and not able to leave her bed." The servant returning to Sea View with this message, met the postman, and took into the breakfast-room with her two letters addressed to Mrs. Lecount.

The first letter was in a handwriting familiar to the housekeeper. It was from the medical attendant on her invalid brother at Zurich; and it announced that the patient's malady had latterly altered in so marked a manner for the better, that there was every hope now of preserving his life.

The address on the second letter was in a strange handwriting. Mrs. Lecount, concluding that it was the answer from Miss Vanstone, waited to read it until breakfast was over, and she could retire to her own room.

She opened the letter, looked at once for the name at the end, and started a little as she read it. The signature was not "Norah Vanstone," but "Harriet Garth."

Miss Garth announced that the elder Miss Vanstone had, a week since, accepted an engagement as governess—subject to the condition of joining the family of her employer at their temporary residence in the south of France, and of returning with them when

they came back to England, probably in a month or six weeks' time. During the interval of this necessary absence, Miss Vanstone had requested Miss Garth to open all her letters; her main object in making that arrangement being to provide for the speedy answering of any communication which might arrive for her from her sister. Miss Magdalen Vanstone had not written since the middle of July—on which occasion the post-mark on the letter showed that it must have been posted in London, in the district of Lambeth—and her elder sister had left England in a state of the most distressing anxiety on her account.

Having completed this explanation, Miss Garth then mentioned that family circumstances prevented her from travelling personally to Aldborough to assist Mrs. Lecount's object—but that she was provided with a substitute, in every way fitter for the purpose, in the person of Mr. Pendril. That gentleman was well acquainted with Miss Magdalen Vanstone; and his professional experience and discretion would render his assistance doubly valuable. He had kindly consented to travel to Aldborough whenever it might be thought necessary. But, as his time was very valuable, Miss Garth specially requested that he might not be sent for, until Mrs. Lecount was quite sure of the day on which his services might be required.

While proposing this arrangement, Miss Garth added that she thought it right to furnish her correspondent with a written description of the younger Miss Vanstone, as well. An emergency might happen

which would allow Mrs. Lecount no time for securing Mr. Pendril's services; and the execution of Mr. Noel Vanstone's intentions towards the unhappy girl who was the object of his forbearance, might be fatally delayed by an unforeseen difficulty in establishing her identity. The personal description, transmitted under these circumstances, then followed. It omitted no personal peculiarity by which Magdalen could be recognized; and it included the "two little moles close together on the left side of the neck," which had been formerly mentioned in the printed handbills sent to York.

In conclusion, Miss Garth expressed her fears that Mrs. Lecount's suspicions were only too likely to be proved true. While, however, there was the faintest chance that the conspiracy might turn out to be directed by a stranger, Miss Garth felt bound in gratitude towards Mr. Noel Vanstone, to assist the legal proceedings which would, in that case, be instituted. She accordingly appended her own formal denial—which she would personally repeat, if necessary—of any identity between herself and the person in disguise who had made use of her name. She was the Miss Garth who had filled the situation of the late Mr. Andrew Vanstone's governess; and she had never in her life been in, or near, the neighbourhood of Vauxhall Walk.

With this disclaimer—and with the writer's fervent assurances that she would do all for Magdalen's advantage which her sister might have done, if her

sister had been in England—the letter concluded. It was signed in full, and was dated with the business-like accuracy in such matters which had always distinguished Miss Garth's character.

This letter placed a formidable weapon in the house-keeper's hands.

It provided a means of establishing Magdalen's identity through the intervention of a lawyer by profession. It contained a personal description minute enough to be used to advantage, if necessary, before Mr. Pendril's appearance. It presented a signed exposure of the false Miss Garth, under the hand of the true Miss Garth; and it established the fact, that the last letter received by the elder Miss Vanstone from the younger, had been posted (and therefore probably written) in the neighbourhood of Vauxhall Walk. If any later letter had been received, with the Aldborough post-mark, the chain of evidence, so far as the question of localities was concerned, might doubtless have been more complete. But, as it was, there was testimony enough (aided as that testimony might be, by the fragment of the brown alpaca dress still in Mrs. Lecount's possession) to raise the veil which hung over the conspiracy, and to place Mr. Noel Vanstone face to face with the plain and startling truth.

The one obstacle which now stood in the way of immediate action on the housekeeper's part, was the obstacle of Miss Bygrave's present seclusion within the limits of her own room. The question of gaining

personal access to her, was a question which must be decided before any communication could be opened with Mr. Pendril. Mrs. Lecount put on her bonnet at once, and called at North Shingles to try what discoveries she could make for herself, before post-time.

On this occasion, Mr. Bygrave was at home; and she was admitted without the least difficulty.

Careful consideration that morning had decided Captain Wragge on advancing matters a little nearer to the crisis. The means by which he proposed achieving this result, made it necessary for him to see the housekeeper and her master separately, and to set them at variance by producing two totally opposite impressions relating to himself, on their minds. Mrs. Lecount's visit, therefore, instead of causing him any embarrassment, was the most welcome occurrence he could have wished for. He received her in the parlour, with a marked restraint of manner, for which she was quite unprepared. His ingratiating smile was gone, and an impenetrable solemnity of countenance appeared in its stead.

"I have ventured to intrude on you, sir," said Mrs. Lecount, "to express the regret with which both my master and I have heard of Miss Bygrave's illness. Is there no improvement?"

"No, ma'am," replied the captain, as briefly as possible. "My niece is no better."

"I have had some experience, Mr. Bygrave, in nursing. If I could be of any use——"

“Thank you, Mrs. Lecount. There is no necessity for our taking advantage of your kindness.”

This plain answer was followed by a moment's silence. The housekeeper felt some little perplexity. What had become of Mr. Bygrave's elaborate courtesy, and Mr. Bygrave's many words? Did he want to offend her? If he did, Mrs. Lecount then and there determined that he should not gain his object.

“May I inquire the nature of the illness?” she persisted. “It is not connected, I hope, with our excursion to Dunwich?”

“I regret to say, ma'am,” replied the captain, “it began with that neuralgic attack in the carriage.”

“So! so!” thought Mrs. Lecount. “He doesn't even *try* to make me think the illness a real one; he throws off the mask, at starting—Is it a nervous illness, sir?” she added, aloud.

The captain answered by a solemn affirmative inclination of the head.

“Then you have *two* nervous sufferers in the house, Mr. Bygrave?”

“Yes, ma'am—two. My wife and my niece.”

“That is rather a strange coincidence of misfortunes.”

“It is, ma'am. Very strange.”

In spite of Mrs. Lecount's resolution not to be offended, Captain Wragge's exasperating insensibility to every stroke she aimed at him, began to ruffle her. She was conscious of some little difficulty in securing her self-possession, before she could say anything more.

“Is there no immediate hope,” she resumed, “of Miss Bygrave being able to leave her room?”

“None whatever, ma’am.”

“You are satisfied, I suppose, with the medical attendance?”

“I have no medical attendance,” said the captain, composedly. “I watch the case myself.”

The gathering venom in Mrs. Lecount swelled up at that reply, and overflowed at her lips.

“Your smattering of science, sir,” she said, with a malicious smile, “includes, I presume, a smattering of medicine as well?”

“It does, ma’am,” answered the captain, without the slightest disturbance of face or manner. “I know as much of one as I do of the other.”

The tone in which he spoke those words, left Mrs. Lecount but one dignified alternative. She rose to terminate the interview. The temptation of the moment proved too much for her; and she could not resist casting the shadow of a threat over Captain Wragge at parting.

“I defer thanking you, sir, for the manner in which you have received me,” she said, “until I can pay my debt of obligation to some purpose. In the mean time, I am glad to infer, from the absence of a medical attendant in the house, that Miss Bygrave’s illness is much less serious than I had supposed it to be when I came here.”

“I never contradict a lady, ma’am,” rejoined the incorrigible captain. “If it is your pleasure, when we

next meet, to think my niece quite well, I shall bow resignedly to the expression of your opinion." With those words he followed the housekeeper into the passage, and politely opened the door for her. "I mark the trick, ma'am!" he said to himself, as he closed it again. "The trump-card in your hand is a sight of my niece; and I'll take care you don't play it!"

He returned to the parlour, and composedly awaited the next event which was likely to happen—a visit from Mrs. Lecount's master. In less than an hour, results justified Captain Wragge's anticipations; and Noel Vanstone walked in.

"My dear sir!" cried the captain, cordially seizing his visitor's reluctant hand, "I know what you have come for. Mrs. Lecount has told you of her visit here, and has no doubt declared that my niece's illness is a mere subterfuge. You feel surprised, you feel hurt—you suspect me of trifling with your kind sympathies—in short, you require an explanation. That explanation you shall have. Take a seat, Mr. Vanstone. I am about to throw myself on your sense and judgment as a man of the world. I acknowledge that we are in a false position, sir; and I tell you plainly at the outset—your housekeeper is the cause of it."

For once in his life, Noel Vanstone opened his eyes. "Lecount!" he exclaimed, in the utmost bewilderment.

"The same, sir," replied Captain Wragge. "I am afraid I offended Mrs. Lecount, when she came here this morning, by a want of cordiality in my manner.

I am a plain man ; and I can't assume what I don't feel. Far be it from me to breathe a word against your housekeeper's character. She is, no doubt, a most excellent and trustworthy woman ; but she has one serious failing common to persons at her time of life who occupy her situation—she is jealous of her influence over her master, although you may not have observed it.”

“I beg your pardon,” interposed Noel Vanstone ; “my observation is remarkably quick. Nothing escapes me.”

“In that case, sir,” resumed the captain, “you cannot fail to have noticed that Mrs. Lecount has allowed her jealousy to affect her conduct towards my niece ?”

Noel Vanstone thought of the domestic passage at arms between Mrs. Lecount and himself, when his guests of the evening had left Sea View, and failed to see his way to any direct reply. He expressed the utmost surprise and distress—he thought Lecount had done her best to be agreeable on the drive to Dunwich—he hoped and trusted there was some unfortunate mistake.

“Do you mean to say, sir,” pursued the captain, severely, “that you have not noticed the circumstance yourself? As a man of honour, and a man of observation, you can't tell me that! Your housekeeper's superficial civility has not hidden your housekeeper's real feeling. My niece has seen it, and so have you, and so have I. My niece, Mr. Vanstone, is a sensitive,

high-spirited girl; and she has positively declined to cultivate Mrs. Lecount's society, for the future. Don't misunderstand me! To my niece, as well as to myself, the attraction of *your* society, Mr. Vanstone, remains the same. Miss Bygrave simply declines to be an apple of discord (if you will permit the classical allusion) cast into your household. I think she is right, so far; and I frankly confess that I have exaggerated a nervous indisposition, from which she is really suffering, into a serious illness—purely and entirely to prevent these two ladies, for the present, from meeting every day on the parade, and from carrying unpleasant impressions of each other into your domestic establishment and mine.”

“I allow nothing unpleasant in *my* establishment,” remarked Noel Vanstone. “I'm master—you must have noticed that already, Mr. Bygrave?—I'm master.”

“No doubt of it, my dear sir. But to live morning, noon, and night, in the perpetual exercise of your authority, is more like the life of a governor of a prison than the life of a master of a household. The wear and tear—consider the wear and tear.”

“It strikes you in that light, does it?” said Noel Vanstone, soothed by Captain Wragge's ready recognition of his authority. “I don't know that you're not right. But I must take some steps directly. I won't be made ridiculous—I'll send Lecount away altogether, sooner than be made ridiculous.” His colour rose; and he folded his little arms fiercely. Captain

Wragge's artfully-irritating explanation had awakened that dormant suspicion of his housekeeper's influence over him, which habitually lay hidden in his mind; and which Mrs. Lecount was now not present to charm back to repose as usual. "What must Miss Bygrave think of me!" he exclaimed, with a sudden outburst of vexation. "I'll send Lecount away. Damme, I'll send Lecount away on the spot!"

"No, no, no!" said the captain, whose interest it was to avoid driving Mrs. Lecount to any desperate extremities. "Why take strong measures, when mild measures will do? Mrs. Lecount is an old servant; Mrs. Lecount is attached and useful. She has this little drawback of jealousy—jealousy of her domestic position with her bachelor master. She sees you paying courteous attention to a handsome young lady; she sees that young lady properly sensible of your politeness—and, poor soul, she loses her temper! What is the obvious remedy? Humour her—make a manly concession to the weaker sex. If Mrs. Lecount is with you, the next time we meet on the parade, walk the other way. If Mrs. Lecount is not with you, give us the pleasure of your company by all means. In short, my dear sir, try the *suaviter in modo* (as we classical men say), before you commit yourself to the *fortiter in re!*"

There was one excellent reason why Noel Vaustone should take Captain Wragge's conciliatory advice. An open rupture with Mrs. Lecount—even if he could have summoned the courage to face it—would imply

the recognition of her claims to a provision, in acknowledgment of the services she had rendered to his father and to himself. His sordid nature quailed within him at the bare prospect of expressing the emotion of gratitude in a pecuniary form ; and, after first consulting appearances by a show of hesitation, he consented to adopt the captain's suggestion, and to humour Mrs. Lecount.

“But I must be considered in this matter,” proceeded Noel Vanstone. “My concession to Lecount's weakness must not be misunderstood. Miss Bygrave must not be allowed to suppose I am afraid of my housekeeper.”

The captain declared that no such idea ever had entered, or ever could enter, Miss Bygrave's mind. Noel Vanstone returned to the subject nevertheless, again and again, with his customary pertinacity. Would it be indiscreet if he asked leave to set himself right personally with Miss Bygrave? Was there any hope that he might have the happiness of seeing her on that day? or, if not, on the next day? or, if not, on the day after? Captain Wragge answered cautiously: he felt the importance of not rousing Noel Vanstone's distrust by too great an alacrity in complying with his wishes.

“An interview to-day, my dear sir, is out of the question,” he said. “She is not well enough; she wants repose. To-morrow I propose taking her out, before the heat of the day begins—not merely to avoid embarrassment, after what has happened with Mrs.

Lecount—but because the morning air, and the morning quiet, are essential in these nervous cases. We are early people here—we shall start at seven o'clock. If you are early too, and if you would like to join us, I need hardly say that we can feel no objection to your company on our morning walk. The hour, I am aware, is an unusual one—but, later in the day, my niece may be resting on the sofa, and may not be able to see visitors."

Having made this proposal, purely for the purpose of enabling Noel Vanstone to escape to North Shingles at an hour in the morning when his housekeeper would be probably in bed, Captain Wragge left him to take the hint, if he could, as indirectly as it had been given. He proved sharp enough (the case being one in which his own interests were concerned) to close with the proposal on the spot. Politely declaring that he was always an early man when the morning presented any special attraction to him, he accepted the appointment for seven o'clock; and rose soon afterwards to take his leave.

"One word at parting," said Captain Wragge. "This conversation is entirely between ourselves. Mrs. Lecount must know nothing of the impression she has produced on my niece. I have only mentioned it to you, to account for my apparently churlish conduct, and to satisfy your own mind. In confidence, Mr. Vanstone—strictly in confidence. Good morning!"

With these parting words, the captain bowed his visitor out. Unless some unexpected disaster occurred, he now saw his way safely to the end of the enterprise.

He had gained two important steps in advance, that morning. He had sown the seeds of variance between the housekeeper and her master; and he had given Noel Vanstone a common interest with Magdalen and himself, in keeping a secret from Mrs. Lecount. "We have caught our man," thought Captain Wragge, cheerfully rubbing his hands—"We have caught our man at last!"

On leaving North Shingles, Noel Vanstone walked straight home; fully restored to his place in his own estimation, and sternly determined to carry matters with a high hand, if he found himself in collision with Mrs. Lecount.

The housekeeper received her master at the door with her mildest manner, and her gentlest smile. She addressed him with downcast eyes; she opposed to his contemplated assertion of independence a barrier of impenetrable respect.

"May I venture to ask, sir," she began, "if your visit to North Shingles has led you to form the same conclusion as mine on the subject of Miss Bygrave's illness?"

"Certainly not, Lecount. I consider your conclusion to have been both hasty and prejudiced."

"I am sorry to hear it, sir. I felt hurt by Mr. Bygrave's rude reception of me—but I was not aware that my judgment was prejudiced by it. Perhaps he received *you*, sir, with a warmer welcome?"

"He received me like a gentleman—that is all I think it necessary to say, Lecount—he received me like a gentleman."

This answer satisfied Mrs. Lecount on the one doubtful point that had perplexed her. Whatever Mr. Bygrave's sudden coolness towards herself might mean, his polite reception of her master implied that the risk of detection had not daunted him, and that the plot was still in full progress. The housekeeper's eyes brightened: she had expressly calculated on this result. After a moment's thinking, she addressed her master with another question :

“You will probably visit Mr. Bygrave again, sir?”

“Of course I shall visit him—if I please.”

“And perhaps see Miss Bygrave, if she gets better?”

“Why not? I should be glad to know why not? Is it necessary to ask your leave first, Lecount?”

“By no means, sir. As you have often said (and as I have often agreed with you), you are master. It may surprise you to hear it, Mr. Noel—but I have a private reason for wishing that you should see Miss Bygrave again.”

Mr. Noel started a little, and looked at his housekeeper with some curiosity.

“I have a strange fancy of my own, sir, about that young lady,” proceeded Mrs. Lecount. “If you will excuse my fancy, and indulge it, you will do me a favour for which I shall be very grateful.”

“A fancy?” repeated her master, in growing surprise. “What fancy?”

“Only this, sir,” said Mrs. Lecount.

She took from one of the neat little pockets of her apron a morsel of note-paper, carefully folded into the

smallest possible compass ; and respectfully placed it in Noel Vanstone's hand.

“If you are willing to oblige an old and faithful servant, Mr. Noel,” she said, in a very quiet and very impressive manner, “you will kindly put that morsel of paper into your waistcoat-pocket ; you will open and read it, for the first time, *when you are next in Miss Bygrave's company* ; and you will say nothing of what has now passed between us to any living creature, from this time to that. I promise to explain my strange request, sir, when you have done what I ask, and when your next interview with Miss Bygrave has come to an end.”

She curtsied with her best grace and quietly left the room.

Noel Vanstone looked from the folded paper to the door, and from the door back to the folded paper, in unutterable astonishment. A mystery in his own house ! under his own nose ! What did it mean ?

It meant that Mrs. Lecount had not wasted her time that morning. While the captain was casting the net over his visitor at North Shingles, the housekeeper was steadily mining the ground under his feet. The folded paper contained nothing less than a carefully-written extract from the personal description of Magdalen in Miss Garth's letter. With a daring ingenuity which even Captain Wragge might have envied, Mrs. Lecount had found her instrument for exposing the conspiracy, in the unsuspecting person of the victim himself !

CHAPTER VII.

LATE that evening, when Magdalen and Mrs. Wragge came back from their walk in the dark, the captain stopped Magdalen on her way up-stairs, to inform her of the proceedings of the day. He added the expression of his opinion that the time had come for bringing Noel Vanstone, with the least possible delay, to the point of making a proposal. She merely answered that she understood him, and that she would do what was required of her. Captain Wragge requested her, in that case, to oblige him by joining a walking excursion in Mr. Noel Vanstone's company, at seven o'clock the next morning. "I will be ready," she replied. "Is there anything more?" There was nothing more. Magdalen bade him good night, and returned to her own room.

She had shown the same disinclination to remain any longer than was necessary in the captain's company, throughout the three days of her seclusion in the house.

During all that time, instead of appearing to weary of Mrs. Wragge's society, she had patently, almost eagerly, associated herself with her companion's one

absorbing pursuit. She, who had often chafed and fretted in past days, under the monotony of her life in the freedom of Combe-Raven, now accepted without a murmur, the monotony of her life at Mrs. Wragge's work-table. She, who had hated the sight of a needle and thread, in old times—who had never yet worn an article of dress of her own making—now toiled as anxiously over the making of Mrs. Wragge's gown, and bore as patiently with Mrs. Wragge's blunders, as if the sole object of her existence had been the successful completion of that one dress. Anything was welcome to her—the trivial difficulties of fitting a gown: the small ceaseless chatter of the poor half-witted creature who was so proud of her assistance, and so happy in her company—anything was welcome that shut her out from the coming future, from the destiny to which she stood self-condemned. That sorely-wounded nature was soothed by such a trifle now as the grasp of her companion's rough and friendly hand—that desolate heart was cheered, when night parted them, by Mrs. Wragge's kiss.

The captain's isolated position in the house, produced no depressing effect on the captain's easy and equal spirits. Instead of resenting Magdalen's systematic avoidance of his society, he looked to results, and highly approved of it. The more she neglected him for his wife, the more directly useful she became in the character of Mrs. Wragge's self-appointed guardian. He had more than once seriously contemplated revoking the concession which had been extorted from

him, and removing his wife at his own sole responsibility, out of harm's way ; and he had only abandoned the idea, on discovering that Magdalen's resolution to keep Mrs. Wragge in her own company was really serious. While the two were together, his main anxiety was set at rest. They kept their door locked by his own desire, while he was out of the house, and, whatever Mrs. Wragge might do, Magdalen was to be trusted not to open it until he came back. That night, Captain Wragge enjoyed his cigar with a mind at ease ; and sipped his brandy and water in happy ignorance of the pitfall which Mrs. Lecount had prepared for him in the morning.

Punctually at seven o'clock, Noel Vanstone made his appearance. The moment he entered the room, Captain Wragge detected a change in his visitor's look and manner. "Something wrong !" thought the captain. "We have not done with Mrs. Lecount yet."

"How is Miss Bygrave this morning ?" asked Noel Vanstone. "Well enough, I hope, for our early walk ?" His half-closed eyes, weak and watery with the morning light and the morning air, looked about the room furtively, and he shifted his place in a restless manner from one chair to another, as he made those polite inquiries.

"My niece is better—she is dressing for the walk," replied the captain, steadily observing his restless little friend while he spoke. "Mr. Vanstone !" he added, on a sudden, "I am a plain Englishman—excuse my blunt way of speaking my mind. You don't meet me this morning as cordially as you met me yesterday.

There is something unsettled in your face. I distrust that housekeeper of yours, sir! Has she been presuming on your forbearance? Has she been trying to poison your mind against me or my niece?"

If Noel Vanstone had obeyed Mrs. Lecount's injunctions, and had kept her little morsel of note-paper folded in his pocket until the time came to use it, Captain Wragge's designedly blunt appeal might not have found him unprepared with an answer. But curiosity had got the better of him—he had opened the note at night, and again in the morning—it had seriously perplexed and startled him—and it had left his mind far too disturbed to allow him the possession of his ordinary resources. He hesitated; and his answer, when he succeeded in making it, began with a prevarication.

Captain Wragge stopped him before he had got beyond his first sentence.

"Pardon me, sir," said the captain in his loftiest manner. "If you have secrets to keep, you have only to say so, and I have done. I intrude on no man's secrets. At the same time, Mr. Vanstone, you must allow me to recall to your memory that I met you yesterday without any reserves on my side. I admitted you to my frankest and fullest confidence, sir—and, highly as I prize the advantages of your society, I can't consent to cultivate your friendship on any other than equal terms." He threw open his respectable frock-coat, and surveyed his visitor with a manly and virtuous severity.

"I mean no offence!" cried Noel Vanstone, piteously.

“Why do you interrupt me, Mr. Bygrave? Why don't you let me explain? I mean no offence.”

“No offence is taken, sir,” said the captain. “You have a perfect right to the exercise of your own discretion. I am not offended—I only claim for myself the same privilege which I accord to you.” He rose with great dignity and rang the bell. “Tell Miss Bygrave,” he said to the servant, “that our walk this morning is put off until another opportunity, and that I won't trouble her to come down stairs.”

This strong proceeding had the desired effect. Noel Vanstone vehemently pleaded for a moment's private conversation before the message was delivered. Captain Wragge's severity partially relaxed. He sent the servant down-stairs again; and, resuming his chair, waited confidently for results. In calculating the facilities for practising on his visitor's weakness, he had one great superiority over Mrs. Lecount. His judgment was not warped by latent female jealousies; and he avoided the error into which the housekeeper had fallen, self-deluded—the error of underrating the impression on Noel Vanstone that Magdalen had produced. One of the forces in this world which no middle-aged woman is capable of estimating at its full value, when it acts against her—is the force of beauty in a woman younger than herself.

“You are so hasty, Mr. Bygrave—you won't give me time—you won't wait and hear what I have to say!” cried Noel Vanstone, piteously, when the servant had closed the parlour door.

“My family failing, sir—the blood of the Bygraves. Accept my excuses. We are alone, as you wished; pray proceed.”

Placed between the alternatives of losing Magdalen’s society, or betraying Mrs. Lecount—unenlightened by any suspicion of the housekeeper’s ultimate object; cowed by the immovable scrutiny of Captain Wragge’s inquiring eye—Noel Vanstone was not long in making his choice. He confusedly described his singular interview of the previous evening with Mrs. Lecount; and taking the folded paper from his pocket, placed it in the captain’s hand.

A suspicion of the truth dawned on Captain Wragge’s mind, the moment he saw the mysterious note. He withdrew to the window before he opened it. The first lines that attracted his attention were these:—
“Oblige me, Mr. Noel, by comparing the young lady who is now in your company, with the personal description which follows these lines, and which has been communicated to me by a friend. You shall know the name of the person described—which I have left a blank—as soon as the evidence of your own eyes has forced you to believe, what you would refuse to credit on the unsupported testimony of Virginie Lecount.”

That was enough for the captain. Before he had read a word of the description itself, he knew what Mrs. Lecount had done, and felt with a profound sense of humiliation, that his female enemy had taken him by surprise.

There was no time to think; the whole enterprise

was threatened with irrevocable overthrow. The one resource, in Captain Wragge's present situation, was to act instantly on the first impulse of his own audacity. Line by line he read on—and still the ready inventiveness which had never deserted him yet, failed to answer the call made on it now. He came to the closing sentence—to the last words which mentioned the two little moles on Magdalen's neck. At that crowning point of the description, an idea crossed his mind—his parti-coloured eyes twinkled; his curly lips twisted up at the corners—Wragge was himself again.

He wheeled round suddenly from the window; and looked Noel Vanstone straight in the face, with a grimly-quiet suggestiveness of something serious to come.

“Pray, sir, do you happen to know anything of Mrs. Lecount's family?” he inquired.

“A respectable family,” said Noel Vanstone—“that's all I know. Why do you ask?”

“I am not usually a betting man,” pursued Captain Wragge. “But on this occasion, I will lay you any wager you like, there is madness in your housekeeper's family.”

“Madness!” repeated Noel Vanstone, amazedly.

“Madness!” reiterated the captain, sternly tapping the note with his forefinger. “I see the cunning of insanity, the suspicion of insanity, the feline treachery of insanity in every line of this deplorable document. There is a far more alarming reason, sir, than I had supposed for Mrs. Lecount's behaviour to my niece.

It is clear to me, that Miss Bygrave resembles some other lady who has seriously offended your housekeeper—who has been formerly connected, perhaps, with an outbreak of insanity in your housekeeper—and who is now evidently confused with my niece, in your housekeeper's wandering mind. That is my conviction, Mr. Vanstone. I may be right, or I may be wrong. All I say is this—neither you, nor any man, can assign a sane motive for the production of that incomprehensible document, and for the use which you are requested to make of it.”

“I don't think Lecount's mad,” said Noel Vanstone, with a very blank look, and a very discomposed manner. “It couldn't have escaped me—with my habits of observation—it couldn't possibly have escaped me if Lecount had been mad.”

“Very good, my dear sir. In my opinion she is the subject of an insane delusion. In your opinion she is in possession of her senses, and has some mysterious motive which neither you nor I can fathom. Either way, there can be no harm in putting Mrs. Lecount's description to the test, not only as a matter of curiosity, but for our own private satisfaction on both sides. It is of course impossible to tell my niece that she is to be made the subject of such a preposterous experiment as that note of yours suggests. But you can use your own eyes, Mr. Vanstone; you can keep your own counsel; and—mad or not—you can at least tell your housekeeper, on the testimony of your own senses, that she is wrong. Let me look at the de-

scription again. The greater part of it is not worth two straws for any purpose of identification ; hundreds of young ladies have tall figures, fair complexions, light brown hair, and light grey eyes. You will say, on the other hand, hundreds of young ladies have not got two little moles close together on the left side of the neck. Quite true. The moles supply us with what we scientific men call, a Crucial Test. When my niece comes down stairs, sir, you have my full permission to take the liberty of looking at her neck."

Noel Vanstone expressed his high approval of the Crucial Test, by smirking and simpering for the first time that morning.

"Of looking at her neck," repeated the captain ; returning the note to his visitor, and then making for the door. "I will go up-stairs myself, Mr. Vanstone," he continued, "and inspect Miss Bygrave's walking dress. If she has innocently placed any obstacles in your way—if her hair is a little too low, or her frill is a little too high—I will exert my authority, on the first harmless pretext I can think of, to have those obstacles removed. All I ask is, that you will choose your opportunity discreetly, and that you will not allow my niece to suppose that her neck is the object of a gentleman's inspection."

The moment he was out of the parlour, Captain Wragge ascended the stairs at the top of his speed, and knocked at Magdalen's door. She opened it to him, in her walking dress—obedient to the signal agreed on between them which summoned her down stairs.

“What have you done with your paints and powders?” asked the captain, without wasting a word in preliminary explanations. “They were not in the box of costumes which I sold for you at Birmingham. Where are they?”

“I have got them here,” replied Magdalen. “What can you possibly mean by wanting them now?”

“Bring them instantly into my dressing-room—the whole collection, brushes, palette, and everything. Don’t waste time in asking questions; I’ll tell you what has happened as we go on. Every moment is precious to us. Follow me instantly!”

His face plainly showed that there was a serious reason for his strange proposal. Magdalen secured her collection of cosmetics, and followed him into the dressing-room. He locked the door, placed her on a chair close to the light, and then told her what had happened.

“We are on the brink of detection,” proceeded the captain, carefully mixing his colours with liquid glue, and with a strong “drier” added from a bottle in his own possession. “There is only one chance for us (lift up your hair from the left side of your neck)—I have told Mr. Noel Vanstone to take a private opportunity of looking at you; and I am going to give the lie direct to that she-devil Lecount, by painting out your moles.”

“They can’t be painted out,” said Magdalen. “No colour will stop on them.”

“*My* colour will,” remarked Captain Wragge. “I

have tried a variety of professions in my time—the profession of painting among the rest. Did you ever hear of such a thing as a Black Eye? I lived some months once in the neighbourhood of Drury Lane, entirely on Black Eyes. My flesh-colour stood on bruises of all sorts, shades, and sizes—and it will stand, I promise you, on your moles.”

With this assurance, the captain dipped his brush into a little lump of opaque colour, which he had mixed in a saucer, and which he had graduated, as nearly as the materials would permit, to the colour of Magdalen’s skin. After first passing a cambric handkerchief with some white powder on it, over the part of her neck on which he designed to operate, he placed two layers of colour on the moles; with the tip of the brush. The process was performed in a few moments—and the moles, as if by magic, disappeared from view. Nothing but the closest inspection could have discovered the artifice by which they had been concealed: at the distance of two or three feet only, it was perfectly invisible.

“Wait here, five minutes,” said Captain Wragge, “to let the paint dry—and then join us in the parlour. Mrs. Lecount herself would be puzzled, if she looked at you now.”

“Stop!” said Magdalen. “There is one thing you have not told me yet. How did Mrs. Lecount get the description which you read down-stairs? Whatever else she has seen of me, she has not seen the mark on my neck—it is too far back, and too high up; my hair hides it.”

“Who knows of the mark?” asked Captain Wragge. She turned deadly pale, under the anguish of a sudden recollection of Frank.

“My sister knows it,” she said faintly.

“Mrs. Lecount may have written to your sister,” suggested the captain.

“Do you think my sister would tell a stranger what no stranger has a right to know? Never! never!”

“Is there nobody else who could tell Mrs. Lecount? The mark was mentioned in the handbills at York. Who put it there?”

“Not Norah! Perhaps Mr. Pendril. Perhaps Miss Garth.”

“Then Mrs. Lecount has written to Mr. Pendril or Miss Garth—more likely to Miss Garth. The governess would be easier to deal with than the lawyer.”

“What can she have said to Miss Garth?”

Captain Wragge considered a little.

“I can't say what Mrs. Lecount may have written,” he said; “but I can tell you what I should have written in Mrs. Lecount's place. I should have frightened Miss Garth by false reports about you, to begin with—and then I should have asked for personal particulars, to help a benevolent stranger in restoring you to your friends.”

The angry glitter flashed up instantly in Magdalen's eyes.

“What *you* would have done, is what Mrs. Lecount has done,” she said indignantly. “Neither lawyer, nor governess, shall dispute my right to my own will,

and my own way. If Miss Garth thinks she can control my actions by corresponding with Mrs. Lecount—I will show Miss Garth she is mistaken! It is high time, Captain Wragge, to have done with these wretched risks of discovery. We will take the short way to the end we have in view, sooner than Mrs. Lecount or Miss Garth think for. How long can you give me to wring an offer of marriage out of that creature down-stairs?"

"I dare not give you long," replied Captain Wragge. "Now your friends know where you are, they may come down on us at a day's notice. Could you manage it in a week?"

"I'll manage it in half the time," she said, with a hard, defiant laugh. "Leave us together this morning as you left us at Dunwich—and take Mrs. Wragge with you, as an excuse for parting company. Is the paint dry yet? Go down-stairs, and tell him I am coming directly."

So, for the second time, Miss Garth's well-meant efforts defeated their own end. So, the fatal force of circumstance turned the hand that would fain have held Magdalen back, into the hand that drove her on.

The captain returned to his visitor in the parlour—after first stopping on the way, to issue his orders for the walking excursion to Mrs. Wragge.

"I am shocked to have kept you waiting," he said, sitting down again confidentially by Noel Vanstone's side. "My only excuse is, that my niece had accidentally dressed her hair, so as to defeat our object. I have been persuading her to alter it—and young

ladies are apt to be a little obstinate on questions relating to their toilette. Give her a chair on that side of you, when she comes in—and take your look at her neck comfortably, before we start for our walk.”

Magdalen entered the room, as he said those words—and, after the first greetings were exchanged, took the chair presented to her, with the most unsuspecting readiness. Noel Vanstone applied the Crucial Test on the spot—with the highest appreciation of the fair material which was the subject of experiment. Not the vestige of a mole was visible on any part of the smooth white surface of Miss Bygrave's neck. It mutely answered the blinking inquiry of Noel Vanstone's half-closed eyes, by the flattest practical contradiction of Mrs. Lecount. That one central incident in the events of the morning, was of all the incidents that had hitherto occurred, the most important in its results. That one discovery shook the housekeeper's hold on her master, as nothing had shaken it yet.

In a few minutes, Mrs. Wragge made her appearance, and excited as much surprise in Noel Vanstone's mind as he was capable of feeling, while absorbed in the enjoyment of Magdalen's society. The walking party left the house at once; directing their steps northward, so as not to pass the windows of Sea View Cottage. To Mrs. Wragge's unutterable astonishment, her husband, for the first time in the course of their married life, politely offered her his arm, and led her on, in advance of the young people, as if the privilege of walking alone with her presented some

special attraction to him! "Step out!" whispered the captain, fiercely. "Leave your niece and Mr. Vanstone alone! If I catch you looking back at them, I'll put the Oriental Cashmere Robe on the top of the kitchen fire! Turn your toes out, and keep step—confound you, keep step!" Mrs. Wragge kept step to the best of her limited ability. Her sturdy knees trembled under her. She firmly believed the captain was intoxicated.

The walk lasted for rather more than an hour. Before nine o'clock they were all back again at North Shingles. The ladies went at once into the house. Noel Vanstone remained with Captain Wragge in the garden.

"Well," said the captain, "what do you think now of Mrs. Lecount?"

"Damn Lecount!" replied Noel Vanstone, in great agitation. "I'm half inclined to agree with you. I'm half inclined to think my infernal housekeeper is mad."

He spoke fretfully and unwillingly, as if the merest allusion to Mrs. Lecount was distasteful to him. His colour came and went; his manner was absent and undecided; he fidgeted restlessly about the garden walk. It would have been plain to a far less acute observation than Captain Wragge's, that Magdalen had met his advances by an unexpected grace and readiness of encouragement, which had entirely overthrown his self-control.

"I never enjoyed a walk so much in my life!" he exclaimed, with a sudden outburst of enthusiasm. "I

hope Miss Bygrave feels all the better for it. Do you go out at the same time to-morrow morning? May I join you again?"

"By all means, Mr. Vanstone," said the captain cordially. "Excuse me for returning to the subject—but what do you propose saying to Mrs. Lecount?"

"I don't know. Lecount is a perfect nuisance! What would you do, Mr. Bygrave, if you were in my place?"

"Allow me to ask a question, my dear sir, before I tell you. What is your breakfast hour?"

"Half-past nine."

"Is Mrs. Lecount an early riser?"

"No. Lecount is lazy in the morning. I hate lazy women! If you were in my place, what should you say to her?"

"I should say nothing," replied Captain Wragge. "I should return at once by the back way; I should let Mrs. Lecount see me in the front garden, as if I was taking a turn before breakfast; and I should leave her to suppose that I was only just out of my room. If she asks you whether you mean to come here to-day, say No. Secure a quiet life, until circumstances force you to give her an answer. Then tell the plain truth—say that Mr. Bygrave's niece and Mrs. Lecount's description are at variance with each other in the most important particular; and beg that the subject may not be mentioned again. There is my advice. What do you think of it?"

If Noel Vanstone could have looked into his cour-

sellor's mind, he might have thought the captain's advice excellently adapted to serve the captain's interests. As long as Mrs. Lecount could be kept in ignorance of her master's visits to North Shingles—so long she would wait until the opportunity came for trying her experiment; and so long she might be trusted not to endanger the conspiracy by any further proceedings. Necessarily incapable of viewing Captain Wragge's advice under this aspect, Noel Vanstone simply looked at it, as offering him a temporary means of escape from an explanation with his housekeeper. He eagerly declared that the course of action suggested to him should be followed to the letter, and returned to Sea View without further delay.

On this occasion, Captain Wragge's anticipations were in no respect falsified by Mrs. Lecount's conduct. She had no suspicion of her master's visit to North Shingles—she had made up her mind, if necessary, to wait patiently for his interview with Miss Bygrave, until the end of the week—and she did not embarrass him by any unexpected questions, when he announced his intention of holding no personal communication with the Bygraves on that day. All she said was, "Don't you feel well enough, Mr. Noel? or don't you feel inclined?" He answered, shortly, "I don't feel well enough;" and there the conversation ended.

The next day, the proceedings of the previous morning were exactly repeated. This time, Noel Vanstone went home rapturously with a keepsake in his breast-pocket—he had taken tender possession of one

of Miss Bygrave's gloves. At intervals during the day, whenever he was alone, he took out the glove, and kissed it with a devotion which was almost passionate in its fervour. The miserable little creature luxuriated in his moments of stolen happiness, with a speechless and stealthy delight which was a new sensation to him. The few young girls whom he had met with, in his father's narrow circle at Zurich, had felt a mischievous pleasure in treating him like a quaint little plaything ; the strongest impression he could make on their hearts, was an impression in which their lap-dogs might have rivalled him ; the deepest interest he could create in them, was the interest they might have felt in a new trinket or a new dress. The only women who had hitherto invited his admiration, and taken his compliments seriously, had been women whose charms were on the wane, and whose chances of marriage were fast failing them. For the first time in his life, he had now passed hours of happiness in the society of a beautiful girl, who had left him to think of her afterwards without a single humiliating remembrance to lower him in his own esteem.

Anxiously as he tried to hide it, the change produced in his look and manner by the new feeling awakened in him, was not a change which could be concealed from Mrs. Lecount. On the second day, she pointedly asked him whether he had not made an arrangement to call on the Bygraves. He denied it as before. "Perhaps you are going to-morrow, Mr. Noel?" persisted the housekeeper. He was at the end of his

resources ; he was impatient to be rid of her inquiries ; he trusted to his friend at North Shingles to help him—and, this time, he answered, Yes. “If you see the young lady,” proceeded Mrs. Lecount, “don’t forget that note of mine, sir, which you have in your waistcoat-pocket.” No more was said on either side—but by that night’s post, the housekeeper wrote to Miss Garth. The letter merely acknowledged, with thanks, the receipt of Miss Garth’s communication ; and informed her that, in a few days, Mrs. Lecount hoped to be in a position to write again, and summon Mr. Pendril to Aldborough.

Late in the evening, when the parlour at North Shingles began to get dark, and when the captain rang the bell for candles, as usual, he was surprised by hearing Magdalen’s voice in the passage, telling the servant to take the lights down-stairs again. She knocked at the door immediately afterwards ; and glided into the obscurity of the room, like a ghost.

“I have a question to ask you about your plans for to-morrow,” she said. “My eyes are very weak this evening, and I hope you will not object to dispense with the candles for a few minutes.”

She spoke in low stifled tones, and felt her way noiselessly to a chair far removed from the captain, in the darkest part of the room. Sitting near the window, he could just discern the dim outline of her dress, he could just hear the faint accents of her voice. For the last two days he had seen nothing of her, except during their morning walk. On that afternoon, he

had found his wife crying in the little back room down-stairs. She could only tell him that Magdalen had frightened her—that Magdalen was going the way again which she had gone when the letter came from China, in the terrible past time at Vauxhall Walk.

“I was sorry to hear that you were ill to-day, from Mrs. Wragge,” said the captain, unconsciously dropping his voice almost to a whisper as he spoke.

“It doesn’t matter,” she answered quietly, out of the darkness. “I am strong enough to suffer, and live. Other girls, in my place, would have been happier—they would have suffered, and died. It doesn’t matter; it will be all the same a hundred years hence. Is he coming again to-morrow morning, at seven o’clock?”

“He is coming, if you feel no objection to it?”

“I have no objection to make; I have done with objecting. But I should like to have the time altered. I don’t look my best in the early morning—I have bad nights, and I rise haggard and worn. Write him a note this evening, and tell him to come at twelve o’clock.”

“Twelve is rather late, under the circumstances, for you to be seen out walking.”

“I have no intention of walking. Let him be shown into the parlour——”

Her voice died away in silence, before she ended the sentence.

“Yes?” said Captain Wragge.

“And leave me alone in the parlour to receive him”

“I understand,” said the captain. “An admirable idea. I’ll be out of the way, in the dining-room, while he is here—and you can come and tell me about it when he has gone.”

There was another moment of silence.

“Is there no way but telling you?” she asked suddenly. “I can control myself while he is with me—but I can’t answer for what I may say or do, afterwards. Is there no other way?”

“Plenty of ways,” said the captain. “Here is the first that occurs to me. Leave the blind down over the window of your room up-stairs, before he comes. I will go out on the beach, and wait there within sight of the house. When I see him come out again, I will look at the window. If he has said nothing, leave the blind down. If he has made you an offer—draw the blind up. The signal is simplicity itself; we can’t misunderstand each other. Look your best to-morrow! Make sure of him, my dear girl—make sure of him, if you possibly can.”

He had spoken loud enough to feel certain that she had heard him—but no answering word came from her. The dead silence was only disturbed by the rustling of her dress, which told him she had risen from her chair. Her shadowy presence crossed the room again; the door shut softly—she was gone. He rang the bell hurriedly for the lights. The servant found him standing close at the window—looking less self-possessed than usual. He told her he felt a little poorly, and sent her to the cupboard for the brandy.

At a few minutes before twelve, the next day, Captain Wragge withdrew to his post of observation—concealing himself behind a fishing-boat drawn up on the beach. Punctually as the hour struck, he saw Noel Vanstone approach North Shingles, and open the garden-gate. When the house door had closed on the visitor, Captain Wragge settled himself comfortably against the side of the boat, and lit his cigar.

He smoked for half an hour—for ten minutes over the half-hour, by his watch. He finished the cigar down to the last morsel of it that he could hold in his lips. Just as he had thrown away the end, the door opened again; and Noel Vanstone came out.

The captain looked up instantly at Magdalen's window. In the absorbing excitement of the moment, he counted the seconds. She might get from the parlour to her own room in less than a minute. He counted to thirty—and nothing happened. He counted to fifty—and nothing happened. He gave up counting, and left the boat impatiently, to return to the house.

As he took his first step forward he saw the signal.

The blind was drawn up.

Cautiously ascending the eminence of the beach, Captain Wragge looked towards Sea View Cottage, before he showed himself on the parade. Noel Vanstone had reached home again: he was just entering his own door.

“If all your money was offered me to stand in your shoes,” said the captain, looking after him—“rich as you are, I wouldn't take it!”

CHAPTER VIII.

On returning to the house, Captain Wragge received a significant message from the servant. "Mr. Noel Vanstone would call again at two o'clock, that afternoon: when he hoped to have the pleasure of finding Mr. Bygrave at home."

The captain's first inquiry, after hearing this message, referred to Magdalen. "Where was Miss Bygrave?" "In her own room." "Where was Mrs. Bygrave?" "In the back parlour." Captain Wragge turned his steps at once in the latter direction; and found his wife, for the second time, in tears. She had been sent out of Magdalen's room, for the whole day; and she was at her wits' end to know what she had done to deserve it. Shortening her lamentations without ceremony, her husband sent her up-stairs on the spot; with instructions to knock at the door, and to inquire whether Magdalen could give five minutes' attention to a question of importance, which must be settled before two o'clock.

The answer returned was in the negative. Magdalen requested that the subject on which she was asked to decide might be mentioned to her in writing.

She engaged to reply in the same way—on the understanding that Mrs. Wragge, and not the servant, should be employed to deliver the note, and to take back the answer.

Captain Wragge forthwith opened his paper-case, and wrote these lines :—“ Accept my warmest congratulations on the result of your interview with Mr. N. V. He is coming again at two o'clock ; no doubt to make his proposals in due form. The question to decide is, whether I shall press him or not on the subject of settlements. The considerations for your own mind are two in number. First, whether the said pressure (without at all underrating your influence over him) may not squeeze for a long time, before it squeezes money out of Mr. N. V. Secondly, whether we are altogether justified—considering our present position towards a certain sharp practitioner in petticoats—in running the risk of delay. Consider these points, and let me have your decision, as soon as convenient.”

The answer returned to this note was written in crooked blotted characters, strangely unlike Magdalen's usually firm and clear handwriting. It only contained these words :—“ Give yourself no trouble about settlements. Leave the use to which he is to put his money for the future, in my hands.”

“ Did you see her ? ” asked the captain, when his wife had delivered the answer.

“ I tried,” said Mrs. Wragge, with a fresh burst of tears—“ but she only opened the door far enough to

put out her hand. I took and gave it a little squeeze—and, oh poor soul, it felt so cold in mine!”

When Mrs. Lecount's master made his appearance at two o'clock, he stood alarmingly in need of an anodyne application from Mrs. Lecount's green fan. The agitation of making his avowal to Magdalen; the terror of finding himself discovered by the housekeeper; the tormenting suspicion of the hard pecuniary conditions which Magdalen's relative and guardian might impose on him—all these emotions, stirring in conflict together, had overpowered his feebly-working heart with a trial that strained it sorely. He gasped for breath, as he sat down in the parlour at North Shingles; and that ominous bluish pallor which always overspread his face in moments of agitation, now made its warning appearance again. Captain Wragge seized the brandy bottle, in genuine alarm; and forced his visitor to drink a wine-glassful of the spirit, before a word was said between them, on either side.

Restored by the stimulant, and encouraged by the readiness with which the captain anticipated everything that he had to say, Noel Vanstone contrived to state the serious object of his visit, in tolerably plain terms. All the conventional preliminaries proper to the occasion were easily disposed of. The suitor's family was respectable; his position in life was undeniably satisfactory; his attachment, though hasty, was evidently disinterested and sincere. All that Captain Wragge had to do was to refer to these various considerations with a happy choice of language, in a voice

that trembled with manly emotion—and this he did to perfection. For the first half-hour of the interview, no allusion whatever was made to the delicate and dangerous part of the subject. The captain waited, until he had composed his visitor; and when that result was achieved, came smoothly to the point in these terms:

“There is one little difficulty, Mr. Vanstone, which I think we have both overlooked. Your housekeeper’s recent conduct inclines me to fear that she will view the approaching change in your life with anything but a friendly eye. Probably, you have not thought it necessary yet to inform her of the new tie which you propose to form?”

Noel Vanstone turned pale at the bare idea of explaining himself to Mrs. Lecount.

“I can’t tell what I’m to do,” he said, glancing aside nervously at the window, as if he expected to see the housekeeper peeping in. “I hate all awkward positions; and this is the most unpleasant position I ever was placed in. You don’t know what a terrible woman Lecount is. I’m not afraid of her; pray don’t suppose I’m afraid of her——”

At those words, his fears rose in his throat, and gave him the lie direct by stopping his utterance.

“Pray don’t trouble yourself to explain,” said Captain Wragge, coming to the rescue. “This is the common story, Mr. Vanstone. Here is a woman who has grown old in your service, and in your father’s service before you; a woman who has contrived, in all sorts of small underhand ways, to presume syste-

matically on her position for years and years past; a woman, in short, whom your inconsiderate but perfectly natural kindness, has allowed to claim a right of property in you——”

“Property!” cried Noel Vanstone, mistaking the captain, and letting the truth escape him through sheer inability to conceal his fears any longer. “I don’t know what amount of property she won’t claim. She’ll make me pay for my father, as well as for myself. Thousands, Mr. Bygrave—thousands of pounds sterling out of my pocket!!!” He clasped his hands in despair at the picture of pecuniary compulsion, which his fancy had conjured up—his own golden life-blood spouting from him in great jets of prodigality under the lancet of Mrs. Lecount!

“Gently, Mr. Vanstone—gently! The woman knows nothing so far, and the money is not gone yet.”

“No, no; the money is not gone, as you say. I’m only nervous about it; I can’t help being nervous. You were saying something just now; you were going to give me advice. I value your advice—you don’t know how highly I value your advice.” He said those words with a conciliatory smile, which was more than helpless: it was absolutely servile in its dependence on his judicious friend.

“I was only assuring you, my dear sir, that I understood your position,” said the captain. “I see your difficulty as plainly as you can see it yourself. Tell a woman like Mrs. Lecount that she must come off her domestic throne, to make way for a young and

beautiful successor, armed with the authority of a wife ; and an unpleasant scene must be the inevitable result. An unpleasant scene, Mr. Vanstone, if your opinion of your housekeeper's sanity is well founded. Something far more serious, if my opinion that her intellect is unsettled, happens to turn out the right one."

"I don't say it isn't my opinion, too," rejoined Noel Vanstone. "Especially after what has happened to-day."

Captain Wragge immediately begged to know what the event alluded to might be.

Noel Vanstone, thereupon, explained—with an infinite number of parentheses, all referring to himself—that Mrs. Lecount had put the dreaded question relating to the little note in her master's pocket, barely an hour since. He had answered her inquiry as Mr. Bygrave had advised him. On hearing that the accuracy of the personal description had been fairly put to the test, and had failed in the one important particular of the moles on the neck, Mrs. Lecount had considered a little, and had then asked him whether he had shown her note to Mr. Bygrave, before the experiment was tried. He had answered in the negative, as the only safe form of reply that he could think of, on the spur of the moment—and the housekeeper had then addressed him in these strange and startling words: "You are keeping the truth from me, Mr. Noel. You are trusting strangers, and doubting your old servant and your old friend. Every time you go to Mr. Bygrave's house, every time you see Miss

Bygrave, you are drawing nearer and nearer to your destruction. They have got the bandage over your eyes, in spite of me; but I tell them, and tell you, before many days are over, I will take it off!" To this extraordinary outbreak—accompanied, as it was, by an expression in Mrs. Lecount's face which he had never seen there before—Noel Vanstone had made no reply. Mr. Bygrave's conviction that there was a lurking taint of insanity in the housekeeper's blood, had recurred to his memory, and he had left the room at the first opportunity.

Captain Wragge listened with the closest attention to the narrative thus presented to him. But one conclusion could be drawn from it—it was a plain warning to him to hasten the end.

"I am not surprised," he said, gravely, "to hear that you are inclining more favourably to my opinion. After what you have just told me, Mr. Vanstone, no sensible man could do otherwise. This is becoming serious. I hardly know what results may not be expected to follow the communication of your approaching change in life to Mrs. Lecount. My niece may be involved in those results. She is nervous; she is sensitive in the highest degree; she is the innocent object of this woman's unreasoning hatred and distrust. You alarm me, sir! I am not easily thrown off my balance—but I acknowledge you alarm me for the future." He frowned, shook his head, and looked at his visitor despondently.

Noel Vanstone began to feel uneasy. The change

in Mr. Bygrave's manner seemed ominous of a reconsideration of his proposals from a new, and unfavourable point of view. He took counsel of his inborn cowardice, and his inborn cunning; and proposed a solution of the difficulty, discovered by himself.

"Why should we tell Lecount at all?" he asked. "What right has Lecount to know? Can't we be married, without letting her into the secret? And can't somebody tell her afterwards, when we are both out of her reach?"

Captain Wragge received this proposal with an expression of surprise, which did infinite credit to his power of control over his own countenance. His foremost object, throughout the interview, had been to conduct it to this point—or, in other words, to make the first idea of keeping the marriage a secret from Mrs. Lecount, emanate from Noel Vanstone instead of from himself. No one knew better than the captain that the only responsibilities which a weak man ever accepts, are responsibilities which can be perpetually pointed out to him as resting exclusively on his own shoulders.

"I am accustomed to set my face against clandestine proceedings of all kinds," said Captain Wragge. "But there are exceptions to the strictest rules; and I am bound to admit, Mr. Vanstone, that your position in this matter is an exceptional position if ever there was one yet. The course you have just proposed—however unbecoming I may think it; however distasteful it may be to myself—would not only spare you a very serious

embarrassment (to say the least of it), but would also protect you from the personal assertion of those pecuniary claims on the part of your housekeeper, to which you have already adverted. These are both desirable results to achieve—to say nothing of the removal, on my side, of all apprehension of annoyance to my niece. On the other hand, however, a marriage solemnized with such privacy as you propose, must be a hasty marriage—for, as we are situated, the longer the delay, the greater will be the risk that our secret may escape our keeping. I am not against hasty marriages, where a mutual flame is fanned by an adequate income. My own was a love-match, contracted in a hurry. There are plenty of instances in the experience of every one, of short courtships and speedy marriages, which have turned up trumps—I beg your pardon—which have turned out well, after all. But if you and my niece, Mr. Vanstone, are to add one to the number of these cases, the usual preliminaries of marriage among the higher classes must be hastened by some means. You doubtless understand me, as now referring to the subject of settlements.”

“I’ll take another teaspoonful of brandy,” said Noel Vanstone, holding out his glass with a trembling hand as the word “settlements” passed Captain Wragge’s lips.

“I’ll take a teaspoonful with you,” said the captain, nimbly dismounting from the pedestal of his respectability, and sipping his brandy with the highest relish. Noel Vanstone, after nervously following his host’s

example, composed himself to meet the coming ordeal, with reclining head and grasping hands—in the position familiarly associated to all civilized humanity with a seat in a dentist's chair.

The captain put down his empty glass and got up again on his pedestal.

“We were talking of settlements,” he resumed. “I have already mentioned, Mr. Vanstone, at an early period of our conversation, that my niece presents the man of her choice with no other dowry than the most inestimable of all gifts—the gift of herself. This circumstance, however (as you are no doubt aware), does not disentitle me to make the customary stipulations with her future husband. According to the usual course in this matter, my lawyer would see yours—consultations would take place—delays would occur—strangers would be in possession of your intentions—and Mrs. Lecount would, sooner or later, arrive at that knowledge of the truth, which you are anxious to keep from her. Do you agree with me, so far?”

Unutterable apprehension closed Noel Vanstone's lips. He could only reply by an inclination of the head.

“Very good,” said the captain. “Now, sir, you may possibly have observed that I am a man of a very original turn of mind. If I have not hitherto struck you in that light, it may then be necessary to mention that there are some subjects on which I persist in thinking for myself. The subject of marriage settlements is one of them. What, let me ask you, does a parent or guardian in my present condition usually do?”

After having trusted the man whom he has chosen for his son-in-law with the sacred deposit of a woman's happiness—he turns round on that man, and declines to trust him with the infinitely inferior responsibility of providing for her pecuniary future. He fetters his son-in-law with the most binding document the law can produce ; and employs with the husband of his own child, the same precautions which he would use if he were dealing with a stranger and a rogue. I call such conduct as this, inconsistent and unbecoming in the last degree. You will not find it my course of conduct, Mr. Vanstone—you will not find me preaching what I don't practise. If I trust you with my niece, I trust you with every inferior responsibility towards her and towards me. Give me your hand, sir—tell me on your word of honour that you will provide for your wife, as becomes her position and your means—and the question of settlements is decided between us, from this moment, at once and for ever !” Having carried out Magdalen's instructions in this lofty tone, he threw open his respectable frock-coat, and sat, with head erect and hand extended, the model of parental feeling, and the picture of human integrity.

For one moment, Noel Vanstone remained literally petrified by astonishment. The next, he started from his chair and wrung the hand of his magnanimous friend, in a perfect transport of admiration. Never yet, throughout his long and varied career, had Captain Wragge felt such difficulty in keeping his countenance, as he felt now. Contempt for the outburst of

miserly gratitude of which he was the object ; triumph in the sense of successful conspiracy against a man who had rated the offer of his protection at five pounds ; regret at the lost opportunity of effecting a fine stroke of moral agriculture, which his dread of involving himself in coming consequences had forced him to let slip—all these varied emotions agitated the captain's mind ; all strove together to find their way to the surface, through the outlets of his face or his tongue. He allowed Noel Vanstone to keep possession of his hand, and to heap one series of shrill protestations and promises on another, until he had regained his usual mastery over himself. That result achieved, he put the little man back in his chair, and returned forthwith to the subject of Mrs Lecount.

“Suppose we now revert to the difficulty which we have not conquered yet,” said the captain. “Let us say that I do violence to my own habits and feelings ; that I allow the considerations I have already mentioned to weigh with me ; and that I sanction your wish to be united to my niece, without the knowledge of Mrs. Lecount. Allow me to inquire, in that case, what means you can suggest for the accomplishment of your end ?”

“I can't suggest anything,” replied Noel Vanstone, helplessly. “Would you object to suggest for me ?”

“You are making a bolder request than you think, Mr. Vanstone. I never do things by halves. When I am acting with my customary candour, I am frank (as you know already) to the utmost verge of imprudence.

When exceptional circumstances compel me to take an opposite course, there isn't a slyer fox alive than I am. If, at your express request, I take off my honest English coat here, and put on a Jesuit's gown—if, purely out of sympathy for your awkward position, I consent to keep your secret for you from Mrs. Lecount—I must have no unseasonable scruples to contend with on your part. If it is neck or nothing on my side, sir—it must be neck or nothing on yours also!"

"Neck or nothing by all means," said Noel Vanstone, briskly—"on the understanding that you go first. I have no scruples about keeping Lecount in the dark. But she is devilish cunning, Mr. Bygrave. How is it to be done?"

"You shall hear directly," replied the captain. "Before I develop my views, I should like to have your opinion on an abstract question of morality. What do you think, my dear sir, of pious frauds in general?"

Noel Vanstone looked a little embarrassed by the question.

"Shall I put it more plainly?" continued Captain Wragge. "What do you say to the universally-accepted maxim, that 'all stratagems are fair in love and war?'—Yes, or No?"

"Yes!" answered Noel Vanstone with the utmost readiness.

"One more question, and I have done," said the captain. "Do you see any particular objection to practising a pious fraud on Mrs. Lecount?"

Noel Vanstone's resolution began to falter a little.

"Is Lecount likely to find it out?" he asked cautiously.

"She can't possibly discover it until after you are married, and out of her reach."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"Play any trick you like on Lecount," said Noel Vanstone, with an air of unutterable relief. "I have had my suspicions lately, that she is trying to domineer over me—I am beginning to feel that I have borne with Lecount long enough. I wish I was well rid of her."

"You shall have your wish," said Captain Wragge. "You shall be rid of her in a week or ten days."

Noel Vanstone rose eagerly and approached the captain's chair.

"You don't say so!" he exclaimed. "How do you mean to send her away?"

"I mean to send her on a journey," replied Captain Wragge.

"Where?"

"From your house at Aldborough, to her brother's bedside at Zurich."

Noel Vanstone started back at the answer, and returned suddenly to his chair.

"How can you do that?" he inquired, in the greatest perplexity. "Her brother (hang him!) is much better. She had another letter from Zurich to say so, this morning."

“Did you see the letter?”

“Yes. She always worries about her brother—she *would* show it to me.”

“Who was it from? and what did it say?”

“It was from the doctor—he always writes to her. I don’t care two straws about her brother; and I don’t remember much of the letter, except that it was a short one. The fellow was much better; and if the doctor didn’t write again, she might take it for granted that he was getting well. That was the substance of it.”

“Did you notice where she put the letter, when you gave it her back again?”

“Yes. She put it in the drawer, where she keeps her account-books.”

“Can you get at that drawer?”

“Of course I can. I have got a duplicate key—I always insist on a duplicate key of the place where she keeps her account-books. I never allow the account-books to be locked up from my inspection: it’s a rule of the house.”

“Be so good as to get that letter to-day, Mr. Vanstone, without your housekeeper’s knowledge; and add to the favour by letting me have it here privately for an hour or two.”

“What do you want it for?”

“I have some more questions to ask, before I can tell you. Have you any intimate friend at Zurich, whom you could trust to help you in playing a trick on Mrs. Lecount?”

“What sort of help do you mean?” asked Noel Vanstone.

“Suppose,” said the captain, “you were to send a letter addressed to Mrs. Lecount, at Aldborough, enclosed in another letter addressed to one of your friends abroad? And suppose you were to instruct that friend to help a harmless practical joke by posting Mrs. Lecount’s letter at Zurich? Do you know any one who could be trusted to do that?”

“I know two people who could be trusted!” cried Noel Vanstone. “Both ladies—both spinsters—both bitter enemies of Lecount’s. But what is your drift, Mr. Bygrave? Though I am not usually wanting in penetration, I don’t altogether see your drift.”

“You shall see it directly, Mr. Vanstone.”

With those words he rose, withdrew to his desk in the corner of the room, and wrote a few lines on a sheet of note-paper. After first reading them carefully to himself, he beckoned to Noel Vanstone to come and read them too.

“A few minutes since,” said the captain, pointing complacently to his own composition with the feather end of his pen, “I had the honour of suggesting a pious fraud on Mrs. Lecount. There it is!”

He resigned his chair at the writing-table to his visitor. Noel Vanstone sat down, and read these lines :

“MY DEAR MADAM,—Since I last wrote, I deeply regret to inform you that your brother has suffered a relapse. The symptoms are so serious, that it is my

painful duty to summon you instantly to his bedside. I am making every effort to resist the renewed progress of the malady; and I have not yet lost all hope of success. But I cannot reconcile it to my conscience to leave you in ignorance of a serious change in my patient for the worse, which *may* be attended by fatal results. With much sympathy, I remain, &c. &c."

Captain Wragge waited with some anxiety for the effect which this letter might produce. Mean, selfish, and cowardly as he was, even Noel Vanstone might feel some compunction at practising such a deception as was here suggested, on a woman who stood towards him in the position of Mrs. Lecount. She had served him faithfully, however interested her motives might be—she had lived, since he was a lad, in the full possession of his father's confidence—she was living now under the protection of his own roof. Could he fail to remember this; and, remembering it, could he lend his aid without hesitation to the scheme which was now proposed to him? Captain Wragge unconsciously retained belief enough in human nature to doubt it. To his surprise, and, it must be added, to his relief also, his apprehensions proved to be perfectly groundless. The only emotions aroused in Noel Vanstone's mind by a perusal of the letter, were a hearty admiration of his friend's idea, and a vainglorious anxiety to claim the credit to himself of being the person who carried it out. Examples may be found every day of a fool who is no coward; examples may be found occasionally of a fool who is not cunning—but

it may reasonably be doubted whether there is a producible instance anywhere of a fool who is not cruel.

“Perfect!” cried Noel Vanstone, clapping his hands. “Mr. Bygrave, you are as good as Figaro in the French comedy. Talking of French, there is one serious mistake in this clever letter of yours—it is written in the wrong language. When the doctor writes to Lecount, he writes in French. Perhaps you meant me to translate it? You can’t manage without my help, can you? I write French as fluently as I write English. Just look at me! I’ll translate it, while I sit here, in two strokes of the pen.”

He completed the translation almost as rapidly as Captain Wragge had produced the original. “Wait a minute!” he cried, in high critical triumph at discovering another defect in the composition of his ingenious friend. “The doctor always dates his letters. Here is no date to yours.”

“I leave the date to you,” said the captain, with a sardonic smile. “You have discovered the fault, my dear sir—pray correct it!”

Noel Vanstone mentally looked into the great gulf which separates the faculty that can discover a defect, from the faculty that can apply a remedy—and, following the example of many a wiser man, declined to cross over it.

“I couldn’t think of taking the liberty,” he said, politely. “Perhaps you had a motive for leaving the date out?”

“Perhaps I had,” replied Captain Wragge, with his

easiest goodhumour. “The date must depend on the time a letter takes to get to Zurich. *I* have had no experience on that point—you must have had plenty of experience in your father’s time. Give me the benefit of your information; and we will add the date before you leave the writing-table.”

Noel Vanstone’s experience was, as Captain Wragge had anticipated, perfectly competent to settle the question of time. The railway resources of the Continent (in the year eighteen hundred and forty-seven) were but scanty; and a letter sent, at that period, from England to Zurich, and from Zurich back again to England, occupied ten days in making the double journey by post.

“Date the letter, in French, five days on from tomorrow,” said the captain, when he had got his information. “Very good. The next thing is to let me have the doctor’s note, as soon as you can. I may be obliged to practise some hours before I can copy your translation in an exact imitation of the doctor’s handwriting. Have you got any foreign note-paper? Let me have a few sheets; and send, at the same time, an envelope addressed to one of those lady-friends of yours at Zurich, accompanied by the necessary request to post the enclosure. This is all I need trouble you to do, Mr. Vanstone. Don’t let me seem inhospitable—but the sooner you can supply me with my materials, the better I shall be pleased. We entirely understand each other, I suppose? Having accepted your proposal for my niece’s hand, I sanction a private marriage

in consideration of the circumstances on your side. A little harmless stratagem is necessary to forward your views. I invent the stratagem, at your request—and you make use of it without the least hesitation. The result is, that in ten days from to-morrow, Mrs. Lecount will be on her way to Switzerland—in fifteen days from to-morrow, Mrs. Lecount will reach Zurich, and discover the trick we have played her—in twenty days from to-morrow, Mrs. Lecount will be back at Aldborough, and will find her master's wedding-cards on the table, and her master himself away on his honeymoon trip. I put it arithmetically, for the sake of putting it plain. God bless you. Good-morning!"

"I suppose I may have the happiness of seeing Miss Bygrave to-morrow?" said Noel Vanstone, turning round at the door.

"We must be careful," replied Captain Wragge. "I don't forbid to-morrow—but I make no promise beyond that. Permit me to remind you that we have got Mrs. Lecount to manage for the next ten days."

"I wish Lecount was at the bottom of the German Ocean!" exclaimed Noel Vanstone, fervently. "It's all very well for you to manage her—you don't live in the house. What am I to do?"

"I'll tell you to-morrow," said the captain. "Go out for your walk alone, and drop in here, as you dropped in to-day, at two o'clock. In the mean time, don't forget those things I want you to send me. Seal them up together in a large envelope. When you have done that, ask Mrs. Lecount to walk out with

you as usual; and while she is upstairs putting her bonnet on, send the servant across to me. You understand? Good-morning.”

An hour afterwards, the sealed envelope, with its enclosures, reached Captain Wragge in perfect safety. The double task of exactly imitating a strange handwriting, and accurately copying words written in a language with which he was but slightly acquainted, presented more difficulties to be overcome than the captain had anticipated. It was eleven o'clock before the employment which he had undertaken was successfully completed, and the letter to Zurich ready for the post.

Before going to bed, he walked out on the deserted parade, to breathe the cool night air. All the lights were extinguished in Sea View Cottage, when he looked that way—except the light in the housekeeper's window. Captain Wragge shook his head suspiciously. He had gained experience enough, by this time, to distrust the wakefulness of Mrs. Lecount.

CHAPTER IX.

IF Captain Wragge could have looked into Mrs. Lecount's room—while he stood on the parade watching the light in her window—he would have seen the housekeeper sitting absorbed in meditation over a worthless little morsel of brown stuff, which lay on her toilet-table.

However exasperating to herself the conclusion might be, Mrs. Lecount could not fail to see that she had been thus far met and baffled successfully at every point. What was she to do next? If she sent for Mr. Pendril, when he came to Aldborough (with only a few hours spared from his business at her disposal)—what definite course would there be for him to follow? If she showed Noel Vanstone the original letter from which her note had been copied, he would apply instantly to the writer for an explanation; would expose the fabricated story by which Mrs. Lecount had succeeded in imposing on Miss Garth; and would, in any event, still declare, on the evidence of his own eyes, that the test by the marks on the neck had utterly failed. Miss Vanstone the elder, whose unexpected presence at Aldborough might have done wonders—

whose voice in the hall at North Shingles, even if she had been admitted no farther, might have reached her sister's ears, and led to instant results—Miss Vanstone the elder, was out of the country, and was not likely to return for a month at least. Look as anxiously as Mrs. Lecount might along the course which she had hitherto followed, she failed to see her way through the accumulated obstacles which now barred her advance.

Other women, in this position, might have waited until circumstances altered, and helped them. Mrs. Lecount boldly retraced her steps, and determined to find her way to her end in a new direction. Resigning, for the present, all further attempt to prove that the false Miss Bygrave was the true Magdalen Vanstone—she resolved to narrow the range of her next efforts; to leave the actual question of Magdalen's identity untouched; and to rest satisfied with convincing her master of this simple fact—that the young lady who was charming him at North Shingles, and the disguised woman who had terrified him in Vauxhall Walk, were one and the same person.

The means of effecting this new object were, to all appearance, far less easy of attainment than the means of effecting the object which Mrs. Lecount had just resigned. Here, no help was to be expected from others—no ostensibly benevolent motives could be put forward as a blind—no appeal could be made to Mr. Pendril or to Miss Garth. Here, the housekeeper's only chance of success depended in the first place on her being able to effect a stolen entrance into Mr.

Bygrave's house; and, in the second place, on her ability to discover whether that memorable alpaca dress from which she had secretly cut the fragment of stuff, happened to form part of Miss Bygrave's wardrobe.

Taking the difficulties now before her in their order as they occurred, Mrs. Lecount first resolved to devote the next few days to watching the habits of the inmates of North Shingles, from early in the morning to late at night; and to testing the capacity of the one servant in the house to resist the temptation of a bribe. Assuming that results proved successful, and that, either by money or by stratagem, she gained admission to North Shingles (without the knowledge of Mr. Bygrave or his niece), she turned next to the second difficulty of the two—the difficulty of obtaining access to Miss Bygrave's wardrobe.

If the servant proved corruptible, all obstacles in this direction might be considered as removed beforehand. But, if the servant proved honest, the new problem was no easy one to solve.

Long and careful consideration of the question led the housekeeper, at last, to the bold resolution of obtaining an interview—if the servant failed her—with Mrs. Bygrave herself. What was the true cause of this lady's mysterious seclusion? Was she a person of the strictest and the most inconvenient integrity? or a person who could not be depended on to preserve a secret? or a person who was as artful as Mr. Bygrave himself, and who was kept in reserve to forward the

object of some new deception which was yet to come? In the first two cases, Mrs. Lecount could trust in her own powers of dissimulation, and in the results which they might achieve. In the last case (if no other end was gained), it might be of vital importance to her to discover an enemy hidden in the dark. In any event, she determined to run the risk. Of the three chances in her favour, on which she had reckoned at the outset of the struggle—the chance of entrapping Magdalen by word of mouth, the chance of entrapping her by the help of her friends, and the chance of entrapping her by means of Mrs. Bygrave—two had been tried, and two had failed. The third remained to be tested yet; and the third might succeed.

So, the captain's enemy plotted against him in the privacy of her own chamber, while the captain watched the light in her window from the beach outside.

Before breakfast the next morning, Captain Wragge posted the forged letter to Zurich with his own hand. He went back to North Shingles with his mind not quite decided on the course to take with Mrs. Lecount, during the all-important interval of the next ten days.

Greatly to his surprise, his doubts on this point were abruptly decided by Magdalen herself.

He found her waiting for him, in the room where the breakfast was laid. She was walking restlessly to and fro, with her head drooping on her bosom, and her hair hanging disordered over her shoulders. The moment she looked up on his entrance, the captain

felt the fear which Mrs. Wragge had felt before him—the fear that her mind would be struck prostrate again, as it had been struck once already, when Frank's letter reached her in Vauxhall Walk.

“Is he coming again to-day?” she asked, pushing away from her the chair which Captain Wragge offered, with such violence that she threw it on the floor.

“Yes,” said the captain, wisely answering her in the fewest words. “He is coming at two o'clock.”

“Take me away!” she exclaimed, tossing her hair back wildly from her face. “Take me away before he comes. I can't get over the horror of marrying him, while I am in this hateful place—take me somewhere where I can forget it, or I shall go mad! Give me two days' rest—two days out of sight of that horrible sea—two days out of prison in this horrible house—two days anywhere in the wide world, away from Aldborough. I'll come back with you! I'll go through with it to the end! Only give me two days' escape from that man and everything belonging to him! Do you hear, you villain?” she cried, seizing his arm and shaking it in a frenzy of passion—“I have been tortured enough—I can bear it no longer!”

There was but one way of quieting her, and the captain instantly took it.

“If you will try to control yourself,” he said, “you shall leave Aldborough in an hour's time.”

She dropped his arm, and leaned back heavily against the wall behind her.

“I'll try,” she answered, struggling for breath, but

looking at him less wildly. "You sha'n't complain of me, if I can help it." She attempted confusedly to take her handkerchief from her apron pocket, and failed to find it. The captain took it out for her. Her eyes softened, and she drew her breath more freely, as she received the handkerchief from him. "You are a kinder man than I thought you were," she said; "I am sorry I spoke so passionately to you just now—I am very, very sorry." The tears stole into her eyes, and she offered him her hand with the native grace and gentleness of happier days. "Be friends with me again," she said, pleadingly. "I'm only a girl, Captain Wragge—I'm only a girl!"

He took her hand in silence—patted it for a moment—and then opened the door for her to go back to her own room again. There was genuine regret in his face, as he showed her that trifling attention. He was a vagabond and a cheat; he had lived a mean, shuffling, degraded life—but he was human; and she had found her way to the lost sympathies in him which not even the self-profanation of a swindler's existence could wholly destroy. "Damn the breakfast!" he said, when the servant came in for her orders. "Go to the inn directly, and say I want a carriage and pair at the door in an hour's time." He went out into the passage, still chafing under a sense of mental disturbance which was new to him; and shouted to his wife more fiercely than ever. "Pack up what we want for a week's absence—and be ready in half an hour!" Having issued those directions, he returned to the

breakfast-room, and looked at the half-spread table with an impatient wonder at his disinclination to do justice to his own meal. "She has rubbed off the edge of my appetite," he said to himself, with a forced laugh. "I'll try a cigar, and a turn in the fresh air."

If he had been twenty years younger, those remedies might have failed him. But where is the man to be found, whose internal policy succumbs to revolution, when that man is on the wrong side of fifty? Exercise and change of place gave the captain back into the possession of himself. He recovered the lost sense of the flavour of his cigar; and recalled his wandering attention to the question of his approaching absence from Aldborough. A few minutes' consideration satisfied his mind that Magdalen's outbreak had forced him to take the course of all others, which, on a fair review of existing emergencies, it was now most desirable to adopt.

Captain Wragge's inquiries, on the evening when he and Magdalen had drunk tea at Sea View, had certainly informed him that the housekeeper's brother possessed a modest competence; that his sister was his nearest living relative; and that there were some unscrupulous cousins on the spot, who were anxious to usurp the place in his will which properly belonged to Mrs. Lecount. Here were strong motives to take the housekeeper to Zurich, when the false report of her brother's relapse reached England. But, if any idea of Noel Vanstone's true position dawned on her, in the mean time—who could say whether she might not, at

the eleventh hour, prefer asserting her large pecuniary interest in her master, to defending her small pecuniary interest at her brother's bedside? While that question remained undecided, the plain necessity of checking the growth of Noel Vanstone's intimacy with the family at North Shingles, did not admit of a doubt; and of all means of effecting that object, none could be less open to suspicion than the temporary removal of the household from their residence at Aldborough. Thoroughly satisfied with the soundness of this conclusion, Captain Wragge made straight for Sea View Cottage, to apologize and explain before the carriage came and the departure took place.

Noel Vanstone was easily accessible to visitors: he was walking in the garden before breakfast. His disappointment and vexation were freely expressed when he heard the news which his friend had to communicate. The captain's fluent tongue, however, soon impressed on him the necessity of resignation to present circumstances. The bare hint that the "pious fraud" might fail after all, if anything happened in the ten days' interval to enlighten Mrs. Lecount, had an instant effect in making Noel Vanstone as patient and as submissive as could be wished.

"I won't tell you where we are going, for two good reasons," said Captain Wragge, when his preliminary explanations were completed. "In the first place, I haven't made up my mind yet; and, in the second place, if you don't know what our destination is, Mrs. Lecount can't worm it out of you. I have not the least

doubt she is watching us, at this moment, from behind her window-curtain. When she asks what I wanted with you this morning, tell her I came to say good-bye for a few days—finding my niece not so well again, and wishing to take her on a short visit to some friends, to try change of air. If you could produce an impression on Mrs. Lecount's mind (without overdoing it), that you are a little disappointed in me, and that you are rather inclined to doubt my heartiness in cultivating your acquaintance, you will greatly help our present object. You may depend on our return to North Shingles in four or five days at farthest. If anything strikes me in the mean while, the post is always at our service, and I won't fail to write to you."

"Won't Miss Bygrave write to me?" inquired Noel Vanstone piteously. "Did she know you were coming here? Did she send me no message?"

"Unpardonable on my part to have forgotten it!" cried the captain. "She sent you her love."

Noel Vanstone closed his eyes in silent ecstasy.

When he opened them again, Captain Wragge had passed through the garden gate and was on his way back to North Shingles. As soon as his own door had closed on him, Mrs. Lecount descended from the post of observation which the captain had rightly suspected her of occupying; and addressed the inquiry to her master which the captain had rightly foreseen would follow his departure. The reply she received produced but one impression on her mind. She at once set it

down as a falsehood, and returned to her own window, to keep watch over North Shingles more vigilantly than ever.

To her utter astonishment, after a lapse of less than half an hour, she saw an empty carriage draw up at Mr. Bygrave's door. Luggage was brought out and packed on the vehicle. Miss Bygrave appeared, and took her seat in it. She was followed into the carriage by a lady of great size and stature, whom the house-keeper conjectured to be Mrs. Bygrave. The servant came next, and stood waiting on the path. The last person to appear was Mr. Bygrave. He locked the house-door, and took the key away with him to a cottage near at hand, which was the residence of the landlord of North Shingles. On his return, he nodded to the servant—who walked away by herself towards the humbler quarter of the little town—and joined the ladies in the carriage. The coachman mounted the box, and the vehicle disappeared.

Mrs. Lecount laid down the opera-glass, through which she had been closely investigating these proceedings, with a feeling of helpless perplexity which she was almost ashamed to acknowledge to herself. The secret of Mr. Bygrave's object in suddenly emptying his house at Aldborough of every living creature in it, was an impenetrable mystery to her.

Submitting herself to circumstances with a ready resignation which Captain Wragge had not shown, on his side, in a similar situation, Mrs. Lecount wasted neither time nor temper in unprofitable guess-

work. She left the mystery to thicken or to clear, as the future might decide; and looked exclusively at the uses to which she might put the morning's event in her own interests. Whatever might have become of the family at North Shingles, the servant was left behind—and the servant was exactly the person whose assistance might now be of vital importance to the housekeeper's projects. Mrs. Lecount put on her bonnet, inspected the collection of loose silver in her purse, and set forth on the spot to make the servant's acquaintance.

She went first to the cottage, at which Mr. Bygrave had left the key of North Shingles, to discover the servant's present address from the landlord. So far as this object was concerned, her errand proved successful. The landlord knew that the girl had been allowed to go home for a few days to her friends, and knew in what part of Aldborough her friends lived. But here his sources of information suddenly dried up. He knew nothing of the destination to which Mr. Bygrave and his family had betaken themselves; and he was perfectly ignorant of the number of days over which their absence might be expected to extend. All he could say was, that he had not received a notice to quit from his tenant, and that he had been requested to keep the key of the house in his possession until Mr. Bygrave returned to claim it in his own person.

Baffled, but not discouraged, Mrs. Lecount turned her steps next towards the back street of Aldborough, and astonished the servant's relatives by conferring on them the honour of a morning call.

Easily imposed on, at starting, by Mrs. Lecount's pretence of calling to engage her, under the impression that she had left Mr. Bygrave's service—the servant did her best to answer the questions put to her. But she knew as little as the landlord of her master's plans. All she could say about them was, that she had not been dismissed, and that she was to await the receipt of a note recalling her when necessary to her situation at North Shingles. Not having expected to find her better informed on this part of the subject, Mrs. Lecount smoothly shifted her ground, and led the woman into talking generally of the advantages and defects of her situation in Mr. Bygrave's family.

Profiting by the knowledge gained, in this indirect manner, of the little secrets of the household, Mrs. Lecount made two discoveries. She found out, in the first place, that the servant (having enough to do in attending to the coarser part of the domestic work) was in no position to disclose the secrets of Miss Bygrave's wardrobe, which were known only to the young lady herself and to her aunt. In the second place, the housekeeper ascertained that the true reason of Mrs. Bygrave's rigid seclusion, was to be found in the simple fact that she was little better than an idiot, and that her husband was probably ashamed of allowing her to be seen in public. These apparently trivial discoveries enlightened Mrs. Lecount on a very important point which had been previously involved in doubt. She was now satisfied that the likeliest way to obtaining a private investigation of Magdalen's wardrobe, lay

through deluding the imbecile lady and not through bribing the ignorant servant.

Having reached that conclusion—pregnant with coming assaults on the weakly-fortified discretion of poor Mrs. Wragge—the housekeeper cautiously abstained from exhibiting herself any longer under an inquisitive aspect. She changed the conversation to local topics; waited until she was sure of leaving an excellent impression behind her; and then took her leave.

Three days passed; and Mrs. Lecount and her master—each with their widely-different ends in view—watched with equal anxiety for the first signs of returning life in the direction of North Shingles. In that interval, no letter either from the uncle or the niece arrived for Noel Vanstone. His sincere feeling of irritation under this neglectful treatment, greatly assisted the effect of those feigned doubts on the subject of his absent friends, which the captain had recommended him to express in the housekeeper's presence. He confessed his apprehensions of having been mistaken, not in Mr. Bygrave only, but even in his niece as well, with such a genuine air of annoyance, that he actually contributed a new element of confusion to the existing perplexities of Mrs. Lecount.

On the morning of the fourth day, Noel Vanstone met the postman in the garden; and, to his great relief, discovered among the letters delivered to him, a note from Mr. Bygrave.

The date of the note was "Woodbridge," and it

contained a few lines only. Mr. Bygrave mentioned that his niece was better, and that she sent her love as before. He proposed returning to Aldborough on the next day—when he would have some new considerations, of a strictly private nature, to present to Mr. Noel Vanstone's mind. In the mean time he would beg Mr. Vanstone not to call at North Shingles, until he received a special invitation to do so—which invitation should certainly be given on the day when the family returned. The motive of this apparently strange request should be explained to Mr. Vanstone's perfect satisfaction, when he was once more united to his friends. Until that period arrived, the strictest caution was enjoined on him in all his communications with Mrs. Lecount—and the instant destruction of Mr. Bygrave's letter, after due perusal of it was (if the classical phrase might be pardoned) a *sine quâ non*.

The fifth day came. Noel Vanstone (after submitting himself to the *sine quâ non*, and destroying the letter) waited anxiously for results; while Mrs. Lecount, on her side, watched patiently for events. Towards three o'clock in the afternoon, the carriage appeared again at the gate of North Shingles. Mr. Bygrave got out and tripped away briskly to the landlord's cottage for the key. He returned with the servant at his heels. Miss Bygrave left the carriage; her giant-relative followed her example; the house-door was opened; the trunks were taken off; the carriage disappeared, and the Bygraves were at home again!

Four o'clock struck, five o'clock, six o'clock, and nothing happened. In half an hour more, Mr. Bygrave—spruce, speckless, and respectable as ever—appeared on the parade, sauntering composedly in the direction of Sea View.

Instead of at once entering the house, he passed it; stopped, as if struck by a sudden recollection; and, retracing his steps, asked for Mr. Vanstone at the door. Mr. Vanstone came out hospitably into the passage. Pitching his voice to a tone which could be easily heard by any listening individual, through any open door in the bedroom regions, Mr. Bygrave announced the object of his visit, on the door-mat, in the fewest possible words. He had been staying with a distant relative. The distant relative possessed two pictures—Gems by the Old Masters—which he was willing to dispose of, and which he had intrusted for that purpose to Mr. Bygrave's care. If Mr. Noel Vanstone, as an amateur in such matters, wished to see the Gems, they would be visible in half an hour's time, when Mr. Bygrave would have returned to North Shingles.

Having delivered himself of this incomprehensible announcement, the arch-conspirator laid his significant forefinger along the side of his short Roman nose—said, "Fine weather, isn't it? Good afternoon!"—and sauntered out inscrutably to continue his walk on the parade.

On the expiration of the half-hour, Noel Vanstone presented himself at North Shingles—with the ardour of a lover burning inextinguishably in his bosom,

through the superincumbent mental fog of a thoroughly bewildered man. To his inexpressible happiness, he found Magdalen alone in the parlour. Never yet had she looked so beautiful, in his eyes. The rest and relief of her four days' absence from Aldborough had not failed to produce their results; she had more than recovered her composure. Vibrating perpetually from one violent extreme to another, she had now passed from the passionate despair of five days since, to a feverish exaltation of spirits, which defied all remorse and confronted all consequences. Her eyes sparkled; her cheeks were bright with colour; she talked incessantly, with a forlorn mockery of the girlish gaiety of past days—she laughed with a deplorable persistency in laughing—she imitated Mrs. Lecount's smooth voice and Mrs. Lecount's insinuating graces of manner, with an overcharged resemblance to the original, which was but the coarse reflection of the delicately-accurate mimicry of former times. Noel Vanstone, who had never yet seen her as he saw her now, was enchanted; his weak head whirled with an intoxication of enjoyment; his wizen cheeks flushed as if they had caught the infection from hers. The half-hour during which he was alone with her, passed like five minutes to him. When that time had elapsed, and when she suddenly left him—to obey a previously-arranged summons to her aunt's presence—miser as he was, he would have paid, at that moment, five golden sovereigns out of his pocket, for five golden minutes more, passed in her society.

The door had hardly closed on Magdalen, before it opened again, and the captain walked in. He entered on the explanations which his visitor naturally expected from him, with the unceremonious abruptness of a man hard pressed for time, and determined to make the most of every moment at his disposal.

“Since we last saw each other,” he began, “I have been reckoning up the chances for and against us, as we stand at present. The result on my own mind, is this:—If you are still at Aldborough, when that letter from Zurich reaches Mrs. Lecount, all the pains we have taken will have been pains thrown away. If your housekeeper had fifty brothers all dying together, she would throw the whole fifty over, sooner than leave you alone at Sea View, while we are your neighbours at North Shingles.”

Noel Vanstone’s flushed cheeks turned pale with dismay. His own knowledge of Mrs. Lecount told him that this view of the case was the right one.

“If *we* go away again,” proceeded the captain, “nothing will be gained—for nothing would persuade your housekeeper, in that case, that we have not left you the means of following us. *You* must leave Aldborough, this time; and, what is more, you must go without leaving a single visible trace behind you for us to follow. If we accomplish this object, in the course of the next five days, Mrs. Lecount will take the journey to Zurich. If we fail, she will be a fixture at Sea View to a dead certainty. Don’t ask questions! I have got your instructions ready for you; and I

want your closest attention to them. Your marriage with my niece depends on your not forgetting a word of what I am now going to tell you.—One question first. Have you followed my advice? Have you told Mrs. Lecount you are beginning to think yourself mistaken in me?”

“I did worse than that,” replied Noel Vanstone, penitently. “I committed an outrage on my own feelings. I disgraced myself by saying that I doubted Miss Bygrave!”

“Go on disgracing yourself, my dear sir! Doubt us both with all your might—and I’ll help you. One question more. Did I speak loud enough this afternoon? Did Mrs. Lecount hear me?”

“Yes. Lecount opened her door; Lecount heard you. What made you give me that message? I see no pictures here. Is this another pious fraud, Mr. Bygrave?”

“Admirably guessed, Mr. Vanstone! You will see the object of my imaginary picture-dealing, in the very next words which I am now about to address to you. When you get back to Sea View, this is what you are to say to Mrs. Lecount. Tell her that my relative’s works of Art are two worthless pictures—copies from the Old Masters, which I have tried to sell you, as originals, at an exorbitant price. Say you suspect me of being little better than a plausible impostor; and pity my unfortunate niece, for being associated with such a rascal as I am. There is your text to speak from. Say in many words what I have just said in few. You can do that, can’t you?”

“Of course I can do it,” said Noel Vanstone. “But I can tell you one thing—Lecount won’t believe me.”

“Wait a little, Mr. Vanstone; I have not done with my instructions yet. You understand what I have just told you? Very good. We may get on from to-day to to-morrow. Go out to-morrow with Mrs. Lecount, at your usual time. I will meet you on the parade, and bow to you. Instead of returning my bow, look the other way. In plain English, cut me! That is easy enough to do, isn’t it?”

“She won’t believe me, Mr. Bygrave—she won’t believe me?”

“Wait a little again, Mr. Vanstone. There are more instructions to come. You have got your directions for to-day, and you have got your directions for to-morrow. Now for the day after. The day after, is the seventh day since we sent the letter to Zurich. On the seventh day, decline to go out walking as before, from dread of the annoyance of meeting me again. Grumble about the smallness of the place; complain of your health; wish you had never come to Aldborough, and never made acquaintance with the Bygraves; and when you have well worried Mrs. Lecount with your discontent, ask her on a sudden, if she can’t suggest a change for the better. If you put that question to her naturally, do you think she can be depended on to answer it?”

“She won’t want to be questioned at all,” replied Noel Vanstone, irritably. “I have only got to say I am tired of Aldborough; and, if she believes me—

which she won't; I'm quite positive, Mr. Bygrave, she won't!—she will have her suggestion ready before I can ask for it.”

“Ay! ay!” said the captain eagerly. “There is some place, then, that Mrs. Lecount wants to go to, this autumn?”

“She wants to go there (hang her!) every autumn.”

“To go where?”

“To Admiral Bartram's—you don't know him, do you?—at St. Crux-in-the-Marsh.”

“Don't lose your patience, Mr. Vanstone! What you are now telling me, is of the most vital importance to the object we have in view. Who is Admiral Bartram?”

“An old friend of my father's. My father laid him under obligations—my father lent him money, when they were both young men. I am like one of the family at St. Crux; my room is always kept ready for me. Not that there's any family at the admiral's, except his nephew, George Bartram. George is my cousin; I'm as intimate with George as my father was with the admiral—and I've been sharper than my father, for I haven't lent my friend any money. Lecount always makes a show of liking George—I believe to annoy me. She likes the admiral, too: he flatters her vanity. He always invites her to come with me to St. Crux. He lets her have one of the best bed-rooms; and treats her as if she was a lady. She's as proud as Lucifer—she likes being treated like a lady—and she pesters me every autumn to go to St.

Crux. What's the matter? What are you taking out your pocket-book for?"

"I want the admiral's address, Mr. Vanstone—for a purpose which I will explain immediately."

With those words, Captain Wragge opened his pocket-book, and wrote down the address from Noel Vanstone's dictation, as follows: "Admiral Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, near Ossory, Essex."

"Good!" cried the captain, closing his pocket-book again. "The only difficulty that stood in our way, is now cleared out of it. Patience, Mr. Vanstone—patience! Let us take up my instructions again at the point where we dropped them. Give me five minutes more attention; and you will see your way to your marriage, as plainly as I see it. On the day after to-morrow, you declare you are tired of Aldborough; and Mrs. Lecount suggests St. Crux. You don't say yes or no on the spot—you take the next day to consider it—and you make up your mind the last thing at night to go to St. Crux the first thing in the morning. Are you in the habit of superintending your own packing up? or do you usually shift all the trouble of it on Mrs. Lecount's shoulders?"

"Lecount has all the trouble, of course; Lecount is paid for it! But I don't really go, do I?"

"You go as fast as horses can take you to the railway; without having held any previous communication with this house, either personally or by letter. You leave Mrs. Lecount behind to pack up your curiosities, to settle with the tradespeople, and to follow you to St.

Crux the next morning. The next morning is the tenth morning. On the tenth morning she receives the letter from Zurich; and if you only carry out my instructions, Mr. Vanstone—as sure as you sit there, to Zurich she goes!”

Noel Vanstone’s colour began to rise again, as the captain’s stratagem dawned on him at last in its true light.

“And what am I to do at St. Crux?” he inquired.

“Wait there till I call for you,” replied the captain. “As soon as Mrs. Lecount’s back is turned, I will go to the church here and give the necessary notice of the marriage. The same day or the next, I will travel to the address written down in my pocket-book—pick you up at the admiral’s—and take you on to London with me to get the licence. With that document in our possession, we shall be on our way back to Aldborough, while Mrs. Lecount is on her way out to Zurich—and before she starts on her return journey, you and my niece will be man and wife! There are your future prospects for you. What do you think of them?”

“What a head you have got!” cried Noel Vanstone, in a sudden outburst of enthusiasm. “You’re the most extraordinary man I ever met with. One would think you had done nothing all your life but take people in.”

Captain Wragge received that unconscious tribute to his native genius, with the complacency of a man who felt that he thoroughly deserved it.

“I have told you already, my dear sir,” he said, modestly, “that I never do things by halves. Pardon me for reminding you that we have no time for exchanging mutual civilities. Are you quite sure about your instructions? I dare not write them down, for fear of accidents. Try the system of artificial memory—count your instructions off, after me, on your thumb and your four fingers. To-day, you tell Mrs. Lecount I have tried to take you in with my relative’s works of Art. To-morrow, you cut me on the parade. The day after, you refuse to go out, you get tired of Aldborough, and you allow Mrs. Lecount to make her suggestion. The next day, you accept the suggestion. And the next day to that, you go to St. Crux. Once more, my dear sir! Thumb—works of Art. Fore-finger—cut me on the parade. Middle finger—tired of Aldborough. Third finger—take Lecount’s advice. Little finger—off to St. Crux. Nothing can be clearer—nothing can be easier to do. Is there anything you don’t understand? Anything that I can explain over again, before you go?”

“Only one thing,” said Noel Vanstone. “Is it settled that I am not to come here again before I go to St. Crux?”

“Most decidedly!” answered the captain. “The whole success of the enterprise depends on your keeping away. Mrs. Lecount will try the credibility of everything you say to her by one test—the test of your communicating, or not, with this house. She will watch you, night and day! Don’t call here, don’t send

messages, don't write letters—don't even go out by yourself. Let her see you start for St. Crux, on her suggestion ; with the absolute certainty in her own mind that you have followed her advice without communicating it in any form whatever to me or to my niece. Do that, and she *must* believe you, on the best of all evidence for our interests, and the worst for hers—the evidence of her own senses.”

With those last words of caution, he shook the little man warmly by the hand, and sent him home on the spot.

CHAPTER X.

ON returning to Sea View, Noel Vanstone executed the instructions which prescribed his line of conduct for the first of the five days, with unimpeachable accuracy. A faint smile of contempt hovered about Mrs. Lecount's lips, while the story of Mr. Bygrave's attempt to pass off his spurious pictures as originals was in progress, but she did not trouble herself to utter a single word of remark when it had come to an end. "Just what I said!" thought Noel Vanstone cunningly watching her face—"she doesn't believe a word of it!"

The next day the meeting occurred on the parade. Mr. Bygrave took off his hat; and Noel Vanstone looked the other way. The captain's start of surprise and scowl of indignation, were executed to perfection—but they plainly failed to impose on Mrs. Lecount. "I am afraid, sir, you have offended Mr. Bygrave to-day," she ironically remarked. "Happily for you, he is an excellent Christian! and I venture to predict that he will forgive you to-morrow."

Noel Vanstone wisely refrained from committing himself to an answer. Once more, he privately applauded his own penetration; once more, he triumphed over his ingenious friend.

Thus far, the captain's instructions had been too clear and simple to be mistaken by any one. But they advanced in complication with the advance of time; and on the third day, Noel Vanstone fell confusedly into the commission of a slight error. After expressing the necessary weariness of Aldborough, and the consequent anxiety for change of scene, he was met (as he had anticipated) by an immediate suggestion from the housekeeper, recommending a visit to St. Crux. In giving his answer to the advice thus tendered, he made his first mistake. Instead of deferring his decision until the next day, he accepted Mrs. Lecount's suggestion on the day when it was offered to him.

The consequences of this error were of no great importance. The housekeeper merely set herself to watch her master, one day earlier than had been calculated on—a result which had been already provided for by the wise precautionary measure of forbidding Noel Vanstone all communication with North Shingles. Doubting, as Captain Wragge had foreseen, the sincerity of her master's desire to break off his connection with the Bygraves by going to St. Crux, Mrs. Lecount tested the truth or falsehood of the impression produced on her own mind, by vigilantly watching for signs of secret communication on one side or on the other. The close attention with which she had hitherto observed the out-goings and in-comings at North Shingles, was now entirely transferred to her master. For the rest of that third day, she never let him out of her sight; she never allowed any third person who

came to the house, on any pretence whatever, a minute's chance of private communication with him. At intervals, through the night, she stole to the door of his room, to listen and assure herself that he was in bed; and before sunrise the next morning, the coast-guard'sman going his rounds was surprised to see a lady who had risen as early as himself, engaged over her work at one of the upper windows of Sea View.

On the fourth morning, Noel Vanstone came down to breakfast conscious of the mistake that he had committed on the previous day. The obvious course to take, for the purpose of gaining time, was to declare that his mind was still undecided. He made the assertion boldly, when the housekeeper asked him if he meant to move that day. Again, Mrs. Lecount offered no remark; and again the signs and tokens of incredulity showed themselves in her face. Vacillation of purpose was not at all unusual in her experience of her master. But, on this occasion, she believed that his caprice of conduct was assumed, for the purpose of gaining time to communicate with North Shingles; and she accordingly set her watch on him once more, with doubled and trebled vigilance.

No letters came that morning. Towards noon the weather changed for the worse, and all idea of walking out as usual was abandoned. Hour after hour, while her master sat in one of the parlours, Mrs. Lecount kept watch in the other—with the door into the passage open, and with a full view of North Shingles through the convenient side window at which

she had established herself. Not a sign that was suspicious appeared; not a sound that was suspicious caught her ear. As the evening closed in, her master's hesitation came to an end. He was disgusted with the weather; he hated the place; he foresaw the annoyance of more meetings with Mr. Bygrave—and he was determined to go to St. Crux the first thing the next morning. Lecount could stay behind to pack up the curiosities and settle with the tradespeople, and could follow him to the admiral's on the next day. The housekeeper was a little staggered by the tone and manner in which he gave these orders. He had, to her own certain knowledge, effected no communication of any sort with North Shingles—and yet he seemed determined to leave Aldborough at the earliest possible opportunity. For the first time she hesitated in her adherence to her own conclusions. She remembered that her master had complained of the Bygraves, before they returned to Aldborough; and she was conscious that her own incredulity had once already misled her, when the appearance of the travelling carriage at the door had proved even Mr. Bygrave himself to be as good as his word.

Still, Mrs. Lecount determined to act with unrelenting caution to the last. That night, when the doors were closed, she privately removed the keys from the door in front and the door at the back. She then softly opened her bedroom window, and sat down by it, with her bonnet and cloak on, to prevent her taking cold. Noel Vanstone's window was on the same side

of the house as her own. If any one came in the dark to speak to him from the garden beneath, they would speak to his housekeeper as well. Prepared at all points to intercept every form of clandestine communication which stratagem could invent, Mrs. Lecount watched through the quiet night. When morning came, she stole down stairs before the servant was up, restored the keys to their places, and reoccupied her position in the parlour, until Noel Vanstone made his appearance at the breakfast-table. Had he altered his mind? No. He declined posting to the railway on account of the expense; but he was as firm as ever in his resolution to go to St. Crux. He desired that an inside place might be secured for him in the early coach. Suspicious to the last, Mrs. Lecount sent the baker's man to take the place. He was a public servant, and Mr. Bygrave would not suspect him of performing a private errand.

The coach called at Sea View. Mrs. Lecount saw her master established in his place, and ascertained that the other three inside seats were already occupied by strangers. She inquired of the coachman if the outside places (all of which were not yet filled up) had their full complement of passengers also. The man replied in the affirmative. He had two gentlemen to call for in the town, and the others would take their places at the inn. Mrs. Lecount forthwith turned her steps towards the inn, and took up her position on the parade opposite, from a point of view which would enable her to see the last of the coach on its departure.

In ten minutes more it rattled away, full outside and in; and the housekeeper's own eyes assured her that neither Mr. Bygrave himself, nor any one belonging to North Shingles, was among the passengers.

There was only one more precaution to take, and Mrs. Lecount did not neglect it. Mr. Bygrave had doubtless seen the coach call at Sea View. He might hire a carriage and follow it to the railway, on pure speculation. Mrs. Lecount remained within view of the inn (the only place at which a carriage could be obtained) for nearly an hour longer, waiting for events. Nothing happened; no carriage made its appearance; no pursuit of Noel Vanstone was now within the range of human possibility. The long strain on Mrs. Lecount's mind relaxed at last. She left her seat on the parade, and returned in higher spirits than usual, to perform the closing household ceremonies at Sea View.

She sat down alone in the parlour and drew a long breath of relief. Captain Wragge's calculations had not deceived him. The evidence of her own senses had at last conquered the housekeeper's incredulity, and had literally forced her into the opposite extreme of belief.

Estimating the events of the last three days from her own experience of them; knowing (as she certainly knew) that the first idea of going to St. Crux had been started by herself, and that her master had found no opportunity and shown no inclination to inform the family at North Shingles that he had accepted her

proposal—Mrs. Lecount was fairly compelled to acknowledge that not a fragment of foundation remained to justify the continued suspicion of treachery in her own mind. Looking at the succession of circumstances under the new light thrown on them by results, she could see nothing unaccountable—nothing contradictory anywhere. The attempt to pass off the forged pictures as originals, was in perfect harmony with the character of such a man as Mr. Bygrave. Her master's indignation at the attempt to impose on him; his plainly-expressed suspicion that Miss Bygrave was privy to it; his disappointment in the niece; his contemptuous treatment of the uncle on the parade, his weariness of the place which had been the scene of his rash intimacy with strangers, and his readiness to quit it that morning—all commended themselves as genuine realities to the housekeeper's mind, for one sufficient reason. Her own eyes had seen Noel Vanstone take his departure from Aldborough without leaving, or attempting to leave, a single trace behind him for the Bygraves to follow.

Thus far the housekeeper's conclusions led her—but no farther. She was too shrewd a woman to trust the future to chance and fortune. Her master's variable temper might relent. Accident might, at any time, give Mr. Bygrave an opportunity of repairing the error that he had committed, and of artfully regaining his lost place in Noel Vanstone's estimation. Admitting that circumstances had at last declared themselves unmistakably in her favour, Mrs. Lecount was not the

less convinced that nothing would permanently assure her master's security for the future, but the plain exposure of the conspiracy which she had striven to accomplish from the first—which she was resolved to accomplish still.

“I always enjoy myself at St. Crux,” thought Mrs. Lecount, opening her account-books, and sorting the tradesmen's bills. “The admiral is a gentleman, the house is noble, the table is excellent. No matter! Here, at Sea View, I stay by myself, till I have seen the inside of Miss Bygrave's wardrobe.”

She packed her master's collection of curiosities in their various cases, settled the claims of the tradespeople, and superintended the covering of the furniture in the course of the day. Towards nightfall she went out, bent on investigation; and ventured into the garden at North Shingles, under cover of the darkness. She saw the light in the parlour window, and the lights in the windows of the rooms up-stairs, as usual. After an instant's hesitation she stole to the house-door, and noiselessly tried the handle from the outside. It turned the lock as she had expected, from her experience of houses at Aldborough and at other watering-places—but the door resisted her; the door was distrustfully bolted on the inside. After making that discovery, she went round to the back of the house, and ascertained that the door on that side was secured in the same manner. “Bolt your doors, Mr. Bygrave, as fast as you like,” said the housekeeper, stealing back again to the parade. “You can't bolt

the entrance to your servant's pocket. The best lock you have, may be opened by a golden key."

She went back to bed. The ceaseless watching, the unrelaxing excitement of the last two days, had worn her out.

The next morning she rose at seven o'clock. In half an hour more she saw the punctual Mr. Bygrave—as she had seen him on many previous mornings, at the same time—issue from the gate of North Shingles, with his towels under his arm, and make his way to a boat that was waiting for him on the beach. Swimming was one among the many personal accomplishments of which the captain was master. He was rowed out to sea every morning, and took his bath luxuriously in the deep blue water. Mrs. Lecount had already computed the time consumed in this recreation by her watch; and had discovered that a full hour usually elapsed, from the moment when he embarked on the beach to the moment when he returned.

During that period, she had never seen any other inhabitant of North Shingles leave the house. The servant was no doubt at her work in the kitchen; Mrs. Bygrave was probably still in her bed; and Miss Bygrave (if she was up at that early hour) had perhaps received directions not to venture out in her uncle's absence. The difficulty of meeting the obstacle of Magdalen's presence in the house, had been, for some days past, the one difficulty which all Mrs. Lecount's ingenuity had thus far proved unable to overcome.

She sat at the window for a quarter of an hour after

the captain's boat had left the beach, with her mind hard at work, and her eyes fixed mechanically on North Shingles—she sat, considering what written excuse she could send to her master for delaying her departure from Aldborough for some days to come—when the door of the house she was watching suddenly opened; and Magdalen herself appeared in the garden. There was no mistaking her figure and her dress. She took a few steps hastily towards the gate; stopped, and pulled down the veil of her garden hat, as if she felt the clear morning light too much for her—then hurried out on the parade, and walked away northward, in such haste, or in such preoccupation of mind, that she went through the garden gate without closing it after her.

Mrs. Lecount started up from her chair, with a moment's doubt of the evidence of her own eyes. Had the opportunity which she had been vainly plotting to produce, actually offered itself to her, of its own accord? Had the chances declared themselves at last in her favour, after steadily acting against her for so long? There was no doubt of it: in the popular phrase, "her luck had turned." She snatched up her bonnet and mantilla; and made for North Shingles, without an instant's hesitation. Mr. Bygrave out at sea; Miss Bygrave away for a walk; Mrs. Bygrave and the servant both at home, and both easily dealt with—the opportunity was not to be lost; the risk was well worth running!

This time, the house-door was easily opened: no

one had bolted it again, after Magdalen's departure. Mrs. Lecount closed the door softly; listened for a moment in the passage; and heard the servant noisily occupied in the kitchen with her pots and pans. "If my lucky star leads me straight into Miss Bygrave's room," thought the housekeeper, stealing noiselessly up the stairs, "I may find my way to her wardrobe without disturbing anybody."

She tried the door nearest to the front of the house, on the right-hand side of the landing. Capricious chance had deserted her already. The lock was turned. She tried the door opposite, on her left hand. The boots ranged symmetrically in a row, and the razors on the dressing-table, told her at once that she had not found the right room yet. She returned to the right-hand side of the landing, walked down a little passage leading to the back of the house, and tried a third door. The door opened—and the two opposite extremes of female humanity, Mrs. Wragge and Mrs. Lecount, stood face to face in an instant!

"I beg ten thousand pardons!" said Mrs. Lecount, with the most consummate self-possession.

"Lord bless us and save us!" cried Mrs. Wragge, with the most helpless amazement.

The two exclamations were uttered in a moment; and, in that moment, Mrs. Lecount took the measure of her victim. Nothing of the least importance escaped her. She noticed the Oriental Cashmere Robe lying half made, and half unpicked again, on the table; she noticed the imbecile foot of Mrs. Wragge search-

ing blindly in the neighbourhood of her chair for a lost shoe ; she noticed that there was a second door in the room besides the door by which she had entered, and a second chair within easy reach, on which she might do well to seat herself in a friendly and confidential way. "Pray don't resent my intrusion," pleaded Mrs. Lecount, taking the chair. "Pray allow me to explain myself!"

Speaking in her softest voice ; surveying Mrs. Wragge with a sweet smile on her insinuating lips, and a melting interest in her handsome black eyes, the housekeeper told her little introductory series of falsehoods, with an artless truthfulness of manner which the Father of Lies himself might have envied. She had heard from Mr. Bygrave that Mrs. Bygrave was a great invalid ; she had constantly reproached herself, in her idle half-hours at Sea View (where she filled the situation of Mr. Noel Vanstone's housekeeper), for not having offered her friendly services to Mrs. Bygrave ; she had been directed by her master (doubtless well known to Mrs. Bygrave, as one of her husband's friends, and, naturally, one of her charming niece's admirers) to join him that day at the residence to which he had removed from Aldborough ; she was obliged to leave early, but she could not reconcile it to her conscience to go, without calling to apologize for her apparent want of neighbourly consideration ; she had found nobody in the house, she had not been able to make the servant hear, she had presumed (not discovering that apartment down stairs) that Mrs.

Bygrave's boudoir might be on the upper story; she had thoughtlessly committed an intrusion of which she was sincerely ashamed, and she could now only trust to Mrs. Bygrave's indulgence to excuse and forgive her.

A less elaborate apology might have served Mrs. Lecount's purpose. As soon as Mrs. Wragge's struggling perceptions had grasped the fact that her unexpected visitor was a neighbour, well known to her by repute, her whole being became absorbed in admiration of Mrs. Lecount's lady-like manners, and Mrs. Lecount's perfectly-fitting gown! "What a noble way she has of talking!" thought poor Mrs. Wragge, as the housekeeper reached her closing sentence. "And, oh my heart alive, how nicely she's dressed!"

"I see I disturb you," pursued Mrs. Lecount, artfully availing herself of the Oriental Cashmere Robe, as a means ready at hand of reaching the end she had in view—"I see I disturb you, ma'am, over an occupation which, I know by experience, requires the closest attention. Dear, dear me, you are unpicking the dress again, I see, after it has been made! This is my own experience again, Mrs. Bygrave. Some dresses are so obstinate! Some dresses seem to say to one, in so many words, 'No! you may do what you like with me; I won't fit!'"

Mrs. Wragge was greatly struck by this happy remark. She burst out laughing, and clapped her great hands in hearty approval.

"That's what this gown has been saying to me, ever since I first put the scissors into it," she exclaimed

cheerfully. "I know I've got an awful big back—but that's no reason. Why should a gown be weeks on hand, and then not meet behind you after all? It hangs over my Boasom like a sack—it does. Look here, ma'am, at the skirt. It won't come right. It draggles in front, and cocks up behind. It shows my heels—and, Lord knows, I get into scrapes enough about my heels, without showing them into the bargain!"

"May I ask a favour?" inquired Mrs. Lecount, confidentially. "May I try, Mrs. Bygrave, if I can make my experience of any use to you? I think our bosoms, ma'am, are our great difficulty. Now, this bosom of yours?—Shall I say in plain words what I think? This bosom of yours is an Enormous Mistake!"

"Don't say that!" cried Mrs. Wragge, imploringly. "Don't, please, there's a good soul! It's an awful big one, I know; but it's modelled, for all that, from one of Magdalen's own."

She was far too deeply interested on the subject of the dress to notice that she had forgotten herself already, and that she had referred to Magdalen by her own name. Mrs. Lecount's sharp ears detected the mistake the instant it was committed. "So! so!" she thought. "One discovery already. If I had ever doubted my own suspicions, here is an estimable lady who would now have set me right.—I beg your pardon," she proceeded, aloud, "did you say this was modelled from one of your niece's dresses?"

“Yes,” said Mrs. Wragge. “It’s as like as two peas.”

“Then,” replied Mrs. Lecount, adroitly, “there must be some serious mistake in the making of your niece’s dress. Can you show it to me?”

“Bless your heart—yes!” cried Mrs. Wragge. “Step this way, ma’am; and bring the gown along with you, please. It keeps sliding off, out of pure aggravation, if you lay it out on the table. There’s lots of room on the bed in here.”

She opened the door of communication, and led the way eagerly into Magdalen’s room. As Mrs. Lecount followed, she stole a look at her watch. Never before had time flown as it flew that morning! In twenty minutes more, Mr. Bygrave would be back from his bath.

“There!” said Mrs. Wragge, throwing open the wardrobe, and taking a dress down from one of the pegs. “Look there! There’s plaits on her Boasom, and plaits on mine. Six of one, and half a dozen of the other; and mine are the biggest—that’s all!”

Mrs. Lecount shook her head gravely, and entered forthwith into subtleties of disquisition on the art of dress-making, which had the desired effect of utterly bewildering the proprietor of the Oriental Cashmere Robe, in less than three minutes.

“Don’t!” cried Mrs. Wragge, imploringly. “Don’t go on like that! I’m miles behind you; and my head’s Buzzing already. Tell us, like a good soul, what’s to be done. You said something about the

pattern just now. Perhaps I'm too big for the pattern? I can't help it, if I am. Many's the good cry I had, when I was a growing girl, over my own size! 'There's half too much of me, ma'am—measure me along or measure me across, I don't deny it—there's half too much of me, any way.'

“My dear madam,” protested Mrs. Lecount, “you do yourself a wrong! Permit me to assure you that you possess a commanding figure—a figure of Minerva. A majestic simplicity in the form of a woman, imperatively demands a majestic simplicity in the form of that woman's dress. The laws of costume are classical; the laws of costume must not be trifled with! Plaits for Venus—puffs for Juno—folds for Minerva. I venture to suggest a total change of pattern. Your niece has other dresses in her collection. Why may we not find a Minerva pattern among them?”

As she said those words, she led the way back to the wardrobe.

Mrs. Wragge followed, and took the dresses out, one by one, shaking her head despondently. Silk dresses appeared, muslin dresses appeared. The one dress which remained invisible, was the dress of which Mrs. Lecount was in search.

“There's the lot of 'em,” said Mrs. Wragge. “They may do for Venus and the two other Ones (I've seen 'em in pieters without a morsel of decent linen among the three)—but they won't do for Me.”

“Surely there is another dress left?” said Mrs. Lecount, pointing to the wardrobe, but touching no-

thing in it. "Surely I see something hanging in the corner, behind that dark shawl?"

Mrs. Wragge removed the shawl; Mrs. Lecount opened the door of the wardrobe a little wider. There—hitched carelessly on the innermost peg—there, with its white spots, and its double flounce, was the brown Alpaca dress!

The suddenness and completeness of the discovery threw the housekeeper, practised dissembler as she was, completely off her guard. She started at the sight of the dress. The instant afterwards, her eyes turned uneasily towards Mrs. Wragge. Had the start been observed? It had passed entirely unnoticed. Mrs. Wragge's whole attention was fixed on the Alpaca dress: she was staring at it incomprehensibly, with an expression of the utmost dismay.

"You seem alarmed, ma'am," said Mrs. Lecount. "What is there in the wardrobe to frighten you?"

"I'd have given a crown-piece out of my pocket," said Mrs. Wragge, "not to have set eyes on that gown. It had gone clean out of my head—and now it's come back again. Cover it up!" cried Mrs. Wragge, throwing the shawl over the dress in a sudden fit of desperation. "If I look at it much longer, I shall think I'm back again in Vauxhall Walk!"

Vauxhall Walk! Those two words told Mrs. Lecount she was on the brink of another discovery. She stole a second look at her watch. There was barely ten minutes to spare before the time when Mr. Bygrave might return; there was not one of those ten

minutes which might not bring his niece back to the house. Caution counselled Mrs. Lecount to go, without running any more risks. Curiosity rooted her to the spot, and gave her the courage to stay at all hazards until the time was up. Her amiable smile began to harden a little, as she probed her way tenderly into Mrs. Wragge's feeble mind.

"You have some unpleasant remembrances of Vauxhall Walk?" she said, with the gentlest possible tone of inquiry in her voice. "Or, perhaps, I should say, unpleasant remembrances of that dress belonging to your niece?"

"The last time I saw her with that gown on," said Mrs. Wragge dropping into a chair and beginning to tremble, "was the time when I came back from shopping, and saw the Ghost."

"The Ghost?" repeated Mrs. Lecount, clasping her hands in graceful astonishment. "Dear madam, pardon me! Is there such a thing in the world? Where did you see it? In Vauxhall Walk? Tell me—you are the first lady I have ever met with who has seen a Ghost—pray tell me!"

Flattered by the position of importance which she had suddenly assumed in the housekeeper's eyes, Mrs. Wragge entered at full length into the narrative of her supernatural adventure. The breathless eagerness with which Mrs. Lecount listened to her description of the spectre's costume, the spectre's hurry on the stairs, and the spectre's disappearance in the bed-room; the extraordinary interest which Mrs. Lecount displayed

on hearing that the dress in the wardrobe was the very dress in which Magdalen happened to be attired, at the awful moment when the ghost vanished—encouraged Mrs. Wragge to wade deeper and deeper into details, and to involve herself in a confusion of collateral circumstances, out of which there seemed to be no prospect of her emerging for hours to come. Faster and faster the inexorable minutes flew by; nearer and nearer came the fatal moment of Mr. Bygrave's return. Mrs. Lecount looked at her watch for the third time, without an attempt, on this occasion, to conceal the action from her companion's notice. There were literally two minutes left for her to get clear of North Shingles. Two minutes would be enough, if no accident happened. She had discovered the Alpaca dress; she had heard the whole story of the adventure in Vauxhall Walk; and, more than that, she had even informed herself of the number of the house—which Mrs. Wragge happened to remember, because it answered to the number of years in her own age. All that was necessary to her master's complete enlightenment, she had now accomplished. Even if there had been time to stay longer, there was nothing worth staying for. "I'll strike this worthy idiot dumb with a *coup d'état*," thought the housekeeper, "and vanish before she recovers herself."

"Horrible!" cried Mrs. Lecount, interrupting the ghostly narrative by a shrill little scream, and making for the door, to Mrs. Wragge's unutterable astonishment, without the least ceremony. "You freeze the

very marrow of my bones. Good-morning!" She coolly tossed the Oriental Cashmere Robe into Mrs. Wragge's expansive lap, and left the room in an instant.

As she swiftly descended the stairs, she heard the door of the bed-room open.

"Where are your manners?" cried a voice from above, hailing her feebly over the banisters. "What do you mean by pitching my gown at me, in that way? You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" pursued Mrs. Wragge, turning from a lamb to a lioness, as she gradually realized the indignity offered to the Cashmere Robe. "You nasty foreigner, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Pursued by this valedictory address, Mrs. Lecount reached the house-door, and opened it without interruption. She glided rapidly along the garden path; passed through the gate; and finding herself safe on the parade, stopped, and looked towards the sea.

The first object which her eyes encountered, was the figure of Mr. Bygrave, standing motionless on the beach—a petrified bather, with his towels in his hand! One glance at him was enough to show that he had seen the housekeeper passing out through his garden-gate.

Rightly conjecturing that Mr. Bygrave's first impulse would lead him to make instant inquiries in his own house, Mrs. Lecount pursued her way back to Sea View as composedly as if nothing had happened. When she entered the parlour where her solitary break-

fast was waiting for her, she was surprised to see a letter lying on the table. She approached to take it up, with an expression of impatience, thinking it might be some tradesman's bill which she had forgotten.

It was the forged letter from Zurich.

CHAPTER X.

THE postmark and the handwriting on the address (admirably imitated from the original), warned Mrs. Lecount of the contents of the letter before she opened it.

After waiting a moment to compose herself, she read the announcement of her brother's relapse.

There was nothing in the handwriting, there was no expression in any part of the letter, which could suggest to her mind the faintest suspicion of foul play. Not the shadow of a doubt occurred to her that the summons to her brother's bedside was genuine. The hand that held the letter dropped heavily into her lap; she became pale, and old, and haggard, in a moment. Thoughts, far removed from her present aims and interests; remembrances that carried her back to other lands than England, to other times than the time of her life in service, prolonged their inner shadows to the surface, and showed the traces of their mysterious passage darkly on her face. The minutes followed each other; and still the servant below stairs waited vainly for the parlour bell. The minutes followed each other; and still she sat, tearless and quiet, dead to the present and the future, living in the past.

The entrance of the servant, uncalled, roused her. With a heavy sigh, the cold and secret woman folded the letter up again, and addressed herself to the interests and the duties of the passing time.

She decided the question of going or not going, to Zurich, after a very brief consideration of it. Before she had drawn her chair to the breakfast-table, she had resolved to go.

Admirably as Captain Wragge's stratagem had worked, it might have failed—unassisted by the occurrence of the morning—to achieve this result. The very accident against which it had been the captain's chief anxiety to guard—the accident which had just taken place in spite of him—was, of all the events that could have happened, the one event which falsified every previous calculation, by directly forwarding the main purpose of the conspiracy! If Mrs. Lecount had not obtained the information of which she was in search, before the receipt of the letter from Zurich, the letter might have addressed her in vain. She would have hesitated, before deciding to leave England; and that hesitation might have proved fatal to the captain's scheme.

As it was, with the plain proofs in her possession—with the gown discovered in Magdalen's wardrobe; with the piece cut out of it, in her own pocket-book; and with the knowledge, obtained from Mrs. Wragge, of the very house in which the disguise had been put on—Mrs. Lecount had now at her command, the means of warning Noel Vanstone, as she had never been able

to warn him yet—or, in other words, the means of guarding against any dangerous tendencies towards reconciliation with the Bygraves, which might otherwise have entered his mind during her absence at Zurich. The only difficulty which now perplexed her, was the difficulty of deciding whether she should communicate with her master personally, or by writing, before her departure from England.

She looked again at the doctor's letter. The word "instantly," in the sentence which summoned her to her dying brother, was twice underlined. Admiral Bartram's house was at some distance from the railway; the time consumed in driving to St. Crux, and driving back again, might be time fatally lost on the journey to Zurich. Although she would infinitely have preferred a personal interview with Noel Vanstone, there was no choice, on a matter of life and death, but to save the precious hours by writing to him.

After sending to secure a place at once in the early coach, she sat down to write to her master.

Her first thought was to tell him all that had happened at North Shingles that morning. On reflection, however, she rejected the idea. Once already (in copying the personal description from Miss Garth's letter) she had trusted her weapons in her master's hands, and Mr. Bygrave had contrived to turn them against her. She resolved this time to keep them strictly in her own possession. The secret of the missing fragment of the Alpaca dress was known to no living creature but herself; and, until her return to

England, she determined to keep it to herself. The necessary impression might be produced on Noel Vanstone's mind without venturing into details. She knew, by experience, the form of letter which might be trusted to produce an effect on him, and she now wrote it, in these words :

“ DEAR MR. NOEL,

“ Sad news has reached me from Switzerland. My beloved brother is dying, and his medical attendant summons me instantly to Zurich. The serious necessity of availing myself of the earliest means of conveyance to the Continent, leaves me but one alternative. I must profit by the permission to leave England, if necessary, which you kindly granted to me at the beginning of my brother's illness ; and I must avoid all delay, by going straight to London, instead of turning aside, as I should have liked, to see you first at St. Crux.

“ Painfully as I am affected by the family calamity which has fallen on me, I cannot let this opportunity pass without adverting to another subject, which seriously concerns your welfare, and in which (on that account) your old housekeeper feels the deepest interest.

“ I am going to surprise and shock you, Mr. Noel. Pray don't be agitated ! pray compose yourself !

“ The impudent attempt to cheat you, which has happily opened your eyes to the true character of our neighbours at North Shingles, was not the only object which Mr. Bygrave had in forcing himself on your acquaintance. The infamous conspiracy with which

you were threatened in London, has been in full progress against you, under Mr. Bygrave's direction, at Aldborough. Accident—I will tell you what accident when we meet—has put me in possession of information precious to your future security. I have discovered, to an absolute certainty, that the person calling herself Miss Bygrave, is no other than the woman who visited us in disguise at Vauxhall Walk.

“I suspected this, from the first; but I had no evidence to support my suspicions; I had no means of combating the false impression produced on you. My hands, I thank Heaven, are tied no longer. I possess absolute proof of the assertion that I have just made—proof that your own eyes can see; proof that would satisfy you, if you were judge in a Court of Justice.

“Perhaps, even yet, Mr. Noel, you will refuse to believe me? Be it so. Believe me or not, I have one last favour to ask, which your English sense of fair play will not deny me.

“This melancholy journey of mine will keep me away from England for a fortnight, or, at most, for three weeks. You will oblige me—and you will certainly not sacrifice your own convenience and pleasure—by staying through that interval with your friends at St. Crux. If, before my return, some unexpected circumstance throws you once more into the company of the Bygraves; and if your natural kindness of heart inclines you to receive the excuses which they will, in that case, certainly address to you—place one

trifling restraint on yourself, for your own sake, if not for mine. Suspend your flirtation with the young lady (I beg pardon of all other young ladies for calling her so!) until my return. If, when I come back, I fail to prove to you that Miss Bygrave is the woman who wore that disguise, and used those threatening words, in Vauxhall Walk, I will engage to leave your service at a day's notice; and I will atone for the sin of bearing false witness against my neighbour, by resigning every claim I have to your grateful remembrance, on your father's account as well as on your own. I make this engagement without reserves of any kind; and I promise to abide by it—if my proofs fail—on the faith of a good Catholic, and the word of an honest woman. Your faithful servant,

“VIRGINIE LECOUNT.”

The closing sentences of this letter—as the house-keeper well knew when she wrote them—embodied the one appeal to Noel Vanstone, which could be certainly trusted to produce a deep and lasting effect. She might have staked her oath, her life, or her reputation on proving the assertion which she had made, and have failed to leave a permanent impression on his mind. But when she staked not only her position in his service, but her pecuniary claims on him as well, she at once absorbed the ruling passion of his life in expectation of the result. There was not a doubt of it, in the strongest of all his interests—the interest of saving his money—he would wait.

“Check-mate for Mr. Bygrave!” thought Mrs. Lecount, as she sealed and directed the letter. “The battle is over—the game is played out.”

While Mrs. Lecount was providing for her master’s future security at Sea View, events were in full progress at North Shingles.

As soon as Captain Wragge recovered his astonishment at the housekeeper’s appearance on his own premises, he hurried into the house, and guided by his own forebodings of the disaster that had happened, made straight for his wife’s room.

Never, in all her former experience, had poor Mrs. Wragge felt the full weight of the captain’s indignation, as she felt it now. All the little intelligence she naturally possessed, vanished at once in the whirlwind of her husband’s rage. The only plain facts which he could extract from her were two in number. In the first place, Magdalen’s rash desertion of her post proved to have no better reason to excuse it than Magdalen’s incorrigible impatience: she had passed a sleepless night; she had risen feverish and wretched; and she had gone out, reckless of all consequences, to cool her burning head in the fresh air. In the second place, Mrs. Wragge had, on her own confession, seen Mrs. Lecount, had talked with Mrs. Lecount, and had ended by telling Mrs. Lecount the story of the ghost. Having made these discoveries, Captain Wragge wasted no time in contending with his wife’s terror and confusion. He withdrew at once to a window

which commanded an uninterrupted prospect of Noel Vanstone's house ; and there established himself, on the watch for events at Sea View, precisely as Mrs. Lecount had established herself, on the watch for events at North Shingles.

Not a word of comment on the disaster of the morning escaped him, when Magdalen returned, and found him at his post. His flow of language seemed at last to have run dry. "I told you what Mrs. Wragge would do," he said—"and Mrs. Wragge has done it." He sat unflinchingly at the window, with a patience which Mrs. Lecount herself could not have surpassed. The one active proceeding in which he seemed to think it necessary to engage, was performed by deputy. He sent the servant to the inn to hire a chaise and a fast horse, and to say that he would call himself, before noon that day, and tell the ostler when the vehicle would be wanted. Not a sign of impatience escaped him, until the time drew near for the departure of the early coach. Then the captain's curly lips began to twitch with anxiety, and the captain's restless fingers beat the devil's tattoo unintermittingly on the window-pane.

The coach appeared at last, and drew up at Sea View. In a minute more, Captain Wragge's own observation informed him that one among the passengers who left Aldborough that morning, was—Mrs. Lecount.

The main uncertainty disposed of, a serious question—suggested by the events of the morning—still re-

mained to be solved. Which was the destined end of Mrs. Lecount's journey—Zurich or St. Crux? That she would certainly inform her master of Mrs. Wragge's ghost story, and of every other disclosure in relation to names and places, which might have escaped Mrs. Wragge's lips, was beyond all doubt. But of the two ways at her disposal of doing the mischief—either personally, or by letter—it was vitally important to the captain to know which she had chosen. If she had gone to the admiral's, no choice would be left him but to follow the coach, to catch the train by which she travelled, and to outstrip her afterwards on the drive from the station in Essex to St. Crux. If, on the contrary, she had been contented with writing to her master, it would only be necessary to devise measures for intercepting the letter. The captain decided on going to the post-office, in the first place. Assuming that the housekeeper had written, she would not have left the letter at the mercy of the servant—she would have seen it safely in the letter-box before leaving Aldborough.

“Good morning,” said the captain, cheerfully addressing the post-master. “I am Mr. Bygrave of North Shingles. I think you have a letter in the box, addressed to Mr.——?”

The post-master was a short man, and consequently a man with a proper idea of his own importance. He solemnly checked Captain Wragge in full career.

“When a letter is once posted, sir,” he said, “nobody out of the office has any business with it, until it reaches its address.”

The captain was not a man to be daunted, even by a post-master. A bright idea struck him. He took out his pocket-book, in which Admiral Bartram's address was written, and returned to the charge.

"Suppose a letter has been wrongly directed by mistake?" he began. "And suppose the writer wants to correct the error after the letter is put into the box?"

"When a letter is once posted, sir," reiterated the impenetrable local authority, "nobody out of the office touches it on any pretence whatever."

"Granted, with all my heart," persisted the captain. "I don't want to touch it—I only want to explain myself. A lady has posted a letter here, addressed to 'Noel Vanstone, Esq., Admiral Bartram's, St. Crux in the Marsh, Essex.' She wrote in a great hurry, and she is not quite certain whether she added the name of the post-town, 'Ossory.' It is of the last importance that the delivery of the letter should not be delayed. What is to hinder your facilitating the post-office work, and obliging a lady, by adding the name of the post-town (if it happens to be left out), with your own hand? I put it to you as a zealous officer—what possible objection can there be to granting my request?"

The post-master was compelled to acknowledge that there could be no objection—provided nothing but a necessary line was added to the address; provided nobody touched the letter but himself; and provided the precious time of the post-office was not suffered to run

to waste. As there happened to be nothing particular to do at that moment, he would readily oblige the lady, at Mr. Bygrave's request.

Captain Wragge watched the post-master's hands, as they sorted the letters in the box, with breathless eagerness. Was the letter there? Would the hands of the zealous public servant suddenly stop? Yes! They stopped, and picked out a letter from the rest.

“‘Noel Vanstone, Esquire,’ did you say?” asked the post-master, keeping the letter in his own hand.

“‘Noel Vanstone, Esquire,’” replied the captain, “‘Admiral Bartram's, St. Crux in the Marsh.’”

“Ossory, Essex,” chimed in the post-master, throwing the letter back into the box. “The lady has made no mistake, sir. The address is quite right.”

Nothing but a timely consideration of the heavy debt he owed to appearances, prevented Captain Wragge from throwing his tall white hat up into the air, as soon as he found himself in the street once more. All further doubt was now at an end. Mrs. Lecount had written to her master—therefore Mrs. Lecount was on her way to Zurich!

With his head higher than ever, with the tails of his respectable frock-coat floating behind him in the breeze, with his bosom's native impudence sitting lightly on its throne—the captain strutted to the inn and called for the railway time-table. After making certain calculations (in black and white, as a matter of course), he ordered his chaise to be ready in an hour—

so as to reach the railway in time for the second train running to London—with which there happened to be no communication from Aldborough by coach.

His next proceeding was of a far more serious kind; his next proceeding implied a terrible certainty of success. The day of the week was Thursday. From the inn he went to the church; saw the clerk; and gave the necessary notice for a marriage by licence on the following Monday.

Bold as he was, his nerves were a little shaken by this last achievement; his hand trembled as it lifted the latch of the garden gate. He doctored his nerves with brandy and water, before he sent for Magdalen to inform her of the proceedings of the morning. Another outbreak might reasonably be expected, when she heard that the last irrevocable step had been taken, and that notice had been given of the wedding day.

The captain's watch warned him to lose no time in emptying his glass. In a few minutes, he sent the necessary message up-stairs. While waiting for Magdalen's appearance, he provided himself with certain materials which were now necessary to carry the enterprise to its crowning point. In the first place, he wrote his assumed name (by no means in so fine a hand as usual) on a blank visiting card; and added, underneath, these words: "Not a moment is to be lost. I am waiting for you at the door—come down to me directly." His next proceeding was to take some half-dozen envelopes out of the case, and to direct them all

alike to the following address: "Thomas Bygrave, Esq., Mussared's Hotel, Salisbury Street, Strand, London." After carefully placing the envelopes and the card in his breast-pocket, he shut up the desk. As he rose from the writing-table, Magdalen came into the room.

The captain took a moment to decide on the best method of opening the interview; and determined, in his own phrase, to dash at it. In two words, he told Magdalen what had happened; and informed her that Monday was to be her wedding day.

He was prepared to quiet her if she burst into a frenzy of passion; to reason with her, if she begged for time; to sympathize with her, if she melted into tears. To his inexpressible surprise, results falsified all his calculations. She heard him without uttering a word, without shedding a tear. When he had done, she dropped into a chair. Her large grey eyes stared at him vacantly. In one mysterious instant, all her beauty left her; her face stiffened awfully, like the face of a corpse. For the first time in the captain's experience of her, fear—all-mastering fear—had taken possession of her, body and soul.

"You are not flinching?" he said, trying to rouse her. "Surely you are not flinching at the last moment?"

No light of intelligence came into her eyes; no change passed over her face. But she heard him—for she moved a little in the chair, and slowly shook her head.

“You planned this marriage of your own free will,” pursued the captain, with the furtive look and the faltering voice of a man ill at ease. “It was your own idea—not mine. I won’t have the responsibility laid on my shoulders—no! not for twice two hundred pounds. If your resolution fails you; if you think better of it——?”

He stopped. Her face was changing; her lips were moving at last. She slowly raised her left hand, with the fingers outspread—she looked at it, as if it was a hand that was strange to her—she counted the days on it, the days before the marriage.

“Friday, one,” she whispered to herself; “Saturday, two; Sunday, three; Monday——” Her hands dropped into her lap; her face stiffened again. The deadly fear fastened its paralyzing hold on her once more; and the next words died away on her lips.

Captain Wragge took out his handkerchief, and wiped his forehead.

“Damn the two hundred pounds!” he said. “Two thousand wouldn’t pay me for this!”

He put the handkerchief back, took the envelopes which he had addressed to himself out of his pocket, and, approaching her closely for the first time, laid his hand on her arm.

“Rouse yourself,” he said, “I have a last word to say to you. Can you listen?”

She struggled, and roused herself—a faint tinge of colour stole over her white cheeks—she bowed her head.

“Look at these,” pursued Captain Wragge, holding up the envelopes. “If I turn these to the use for which they have been written, Mrs. Lecount’s master will never receive Mrs. Lecount’s letter. If I tear them up, he will know by to-morrow’s post that you are the woman who visited him in Vauxhall Walk. Say the word! Shall I tear the envelopes up, or shall I put them back in my pocket?”

There was a pause of dead silence. The murmur of the summer waves on the shingle of the beach, and the voices of the summer idlers on the parade, floated through the open window, and filled the empty stillness of the room.

She raised her head; she lifted her hand and pointed steadily to the envelopes.

“Put them back,” she said.

“Do you mean it?” he asked.

“I mean it.”

As she gave that answer, there was a sound of wheels on the road outside.

“You hear those wheels?” said Captain Wragge.

“I hear them.”

“You see the chaise?” said the captain, pointing through the window, as the chaise which had been ordered from the inn made its appearance at the garden gate.

“I see it.”

“And, of your own free will, you tell me to go?”

“Yes. Go!”

Without another word, he left her. The servant

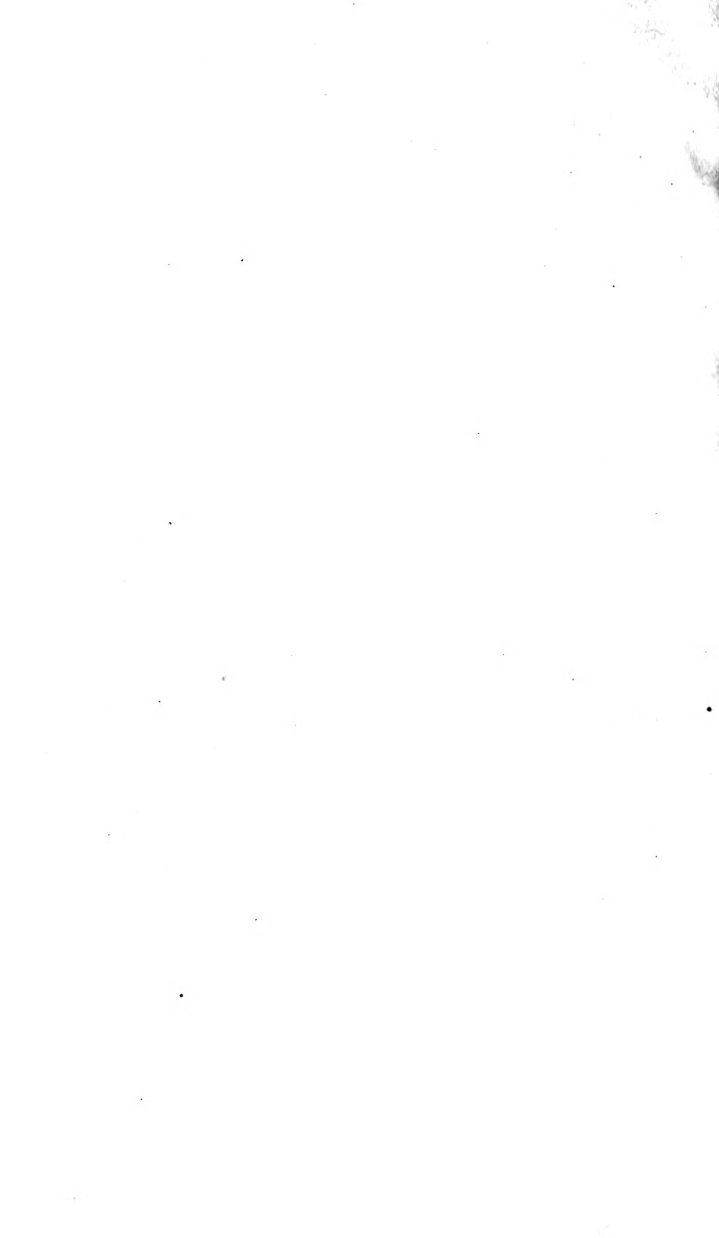
was waiting at the door with his travelling-bag. "Miss Bygrave is not well," he said. "Tell your mistress to go to her in the parlour."

He stepped into the chaise, and started on the first stage of the journey to St. Crux.

THE END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.









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